

The Self-Actualization (Enhancement of Decision-Making Skills) Among Higher Education

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Self-actualization, a concept rooted in humanistic psychology, represents the realization of one's potential and capabilities. Within the higher education context, the pursuit of self-actualization significantly correlates with the development of critical life skills, particularly decision-making. This research investigates the relationship between self-actualization and the enhancement of decision-making skills among higher education students. As higher education institutions aim to develop well-rounded individuals, understanding the dynamics between personal growth and cognitive competencies is essential. The study employed a mixed-method approach, utilizing surveys and focus group discussions from a sample of 500 students across public and private universities in Pakistan. The findings reveal that students who score higher on self-actualization scales demonstrate greater confidence, analytical thinking, emotional regulation, and independence in their decision-making processes. Furthermore, gender, academic discipline, and socio-economic background were found to mediate this relationship. The results underscore the necessity of integrating personal development modules within curricula to foster decision-making competencies that are crucial in both academic and life contexts. This paper provides practical policy recommendations for educational institutions and policymakers to emphasize psychological empowerment and promote holistic learning experiences. By fostering self-actualization, higher education can play a pivotal role in shaping thoughtful, decisive future leaders prepared to address complex societal challenges.

1. Introduction

Self-actualization, described by Maslow (1943) as the pinnacle of human motivation, represents individuals realizing their full potential. In the scope of higher education, students not only accumulate knowledge but also embark on deep personal growth—cultivating autonomy, self-awareness, and critical decision-making skills. This journey has intensified in importance since the mid-2010s due to societal disruptions such as COVID-19 lockdowns, digital transformation, and shifting mindset among Generation Z students (WIRED, 2024).

1.1 Relevance in Post-Pandemic Education

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid shift to online learning, emphasizing self-regulation and autonomy—core components of both self-actualization and effective decision-making (Rosli et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters internal motivation, well-being, and adaptive decision-making (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2018). In universities transitioning to blended and online formats, these processes became essential for students' academic resilience and career confidence (McKenzie, 2025; Zhao et al., 2024).

1.2 Generation Z: Seeking Authentic Purpose

Gen Z students prioritize meaning and self-alignment in their academic and career pursuits—rejecting goals solely tied to financial or status gains (WIRED, 2024). This demographic shift introduces a new drive for self-actualization framed around purpose-driven decision-making. Educational systems must therefore support authentic engagement and personal values—not just academic achievement.

1.3 Learning Readiness and Self-Actualization

Recent structural equation modeling studies confirm that self-actualization significantly enhances learning readiness and proactive learning behaviors among students (Suyatno et al., 2023). When higher education environments support exploration, reflection, and autonomy, students are better primed to manage learning tasks and make strategic academic choices.

1.4 Motivation, Self-Realization, and Decision Making

Emerging research from 2024 considers the bidirectional relationship between students' motives (e.g., mastery, future career goals) and their self-actualization—showing that motivational orientation predicts cognitive flexibility and self-awareness, essential for sound decision-making (Jabbarov & Memmedova, 2025). Moreover, intrinsic motives aligned with personal and societal values reinforce students' commitment and purposeful decision strategies during university (Gillet et al., 2020).

1.5 Decision-Making Styles, Self-Construal, and Personal Values

In Pakistani universities, decision-making styles are deeply influenced by students' self-construal—whether they see themselves as independent or interdependent (Altaf et al., 2022)⁷. Research indicates that self-actualization—through enhanced emotional intelligence and self-concept—improves adaptive decision-making (Yousaf & Usman, 2022). Further, psychological

studies link fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to stronger decision-making self-efficacy for career choices (Xu et al., 2023).

1.6 Integrating SDT and Educational Practice

SDT-driven educational models, which embed choice, meaningful engagement, and reflective practice, significantly boost students' intrinsic motivation and autonomous decision-making (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020; Rosli et al., 2022). Problem-based learning (PBL), a constructivist approach, mirrors self-actualization by placing students at the center of inquiry and decision-making, improving their critical thinking, adaptability, and meta-cognitive control (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2024).

1.7 Holistic Growth in Pakistani Context

Locally, studies suggest Pakistani students at higher education institutions have high personal commitment toward self-actualization (Zeeshan & Ali, 2020). However, they often lack structured institutional support in emotional regulation and mentorship, which are crucial for transitioning from intention to effective decision-making (Ali & Kazmi, 2023). Additionally, youth in Karachi emphasize holistic development—backed by familial and peer support—as a key pathway to self-actualization and empowerment (Ali, Kazimi & Sewani, 2023).

1.8 Introducing the Present Study

Despite robust global evidence, there's a clear need for context-specific data in Pakistan. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating:

- The level of self-actualization among university students.
- The quality of their decision-making skills.
- The linkage between the two, moderated by gender, discipline, and support systems.
- Practical curricular strategies to foster self-awareness and decisive autonomy.

It addresses a critical policy need: designing educational frameworks that do not merely teach, but nurture thoughtful, empowered individuals capable of navigating complex societal challenges.

1.9 Contribution and Structure

This research bridges psychological theory and academic practice, emphasizing:

1. Self-actualization as a catalyst for decision-making in higher education.
2. Contextual variables specific to Pakistani universities.
3. Pedagogical interventions integrating reflective and inquiry-based learning with personal growth.

1.10 Research Objectives

1. To examine the level of self-actualization among university students.

2. To assess the decision-making abilities of students in higher education.
3. To determine the relationship between self-actualization and decision-making skills.
4. To explore the impact of demographic factors such as gender, academic stream, and socio-economic status.
5. To propose recommendations for integrating self-actualization practices within university curricula.

1.11 Research Questions

1. What is the extent of self-actualization among higher education students?
2. How developed are students' decision-making skills across disciplines?
3. Is there a significant relationship between self-actualization and decision-making ability?
4. Do gender and academic background influence this relationship?
5. What institutional strategies can enhance student self-actualization and decision-making?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-Actualization and Personal Growth

Maslow's (2000) seminal work continues to influence student development theory, asserting that self-actualization underpins creativity, purpose, and autonomy—core qualities that support effective decision making. Building on Maslow, Shostrom (2004) developed a self-actualization inventory widely used to assess personal growth in educational settings. Rogers (2004) and Vakhromov et al. (2016) elaborated on these frameworks, highlighting how educational practices facilitate students' realization of potential. The importance of self-actualization in academic and professional success has been reinforced in diverse contexts, from Russian university environments (Samal, 2018) to gifted education (Razak et al., 2021).

2.2 Self-Regulated Learning and Decision Making

Self-regulated learning (SRL) literature demonstrates a strong link between autonomous study habits and higher-order decision-making. Pintrich et al. (2000) emphasized that metacognitive strategies foster decision-making autonomy, corroborated by Winne and Marley's (2000) cognitive self-regulation model. Alvi et al. (2016) showed that university students employing reflective SRL techniques exhibit enhanced choice-making capabilities. Thompson (2003) found that explicit instruction in SRL improved learners' critical planning and control, reinforcing decision-making growth.

2.3 Emotional Intelligence, Self-Efficacy, and Decision Processes

Emotional intelligence (EI) enhances decision-making by enabling students to regulate emotions in challenging situations (Jafri et al., 2016; She & Hu, 2021). Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy concept parallels this—stronger self-belief supports decisive academic and career

judgments. Several recent studies (Dev, 2016; Ahmad & Safaria, 2013; Kadiyono & Hafiar, 2017) confirm that both EI and self-efficacy significantly predict strategic decision-making and resilience in learners.

2.4 Motivation, Intrinsic Drive, and Cognitive Flexibility

Deci and Ryan's (2000, 2014) Self-Determination Theory emphasizes intrinsic motivation's role in autonomy, competence, and thus self-actualization. Gillet et al. (2020) and Wu et al. (2022) further establish that grit and growth mindset contribute to persistence and adaptive decision-making. Suyatno et al. (2023) used structural modeling to demonstrate that self-actualized students exhibit proactive learning readiness, a key factor in strategic academic choices.

2.5 Problem-Based, Reflective, and Transformative Pedagogies

Constructivist methods like problem-based learning (PBL) encourage autonomy, metacognition, and practical decision-making (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2024; Koh *et al.*, 2003). Reflective practice—prevalent in educational programs—promotes continual self-awareness, vital for sound decision-making (Tsangaridou & O'Sullivan, 1997; Giles, 2004). Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 2000) connects critical reflection to profound shifts in decision-making frameworks.

2.6 Flow, Engagement, and Academic Self-Actualization

Csikszentmihályi's (2000) flow theory suggests optimal immersive learning fosters motivation and cognitive alignment conducive to informed decision-making. Schuler and Brunner (2009) and Borovay et al. (2019) confirmed flow states enhance problem-solving skills and deliberate choice-making. Oliveira et al. (2021) demonstrated that gamified learning environments further promote flow, thus nurturing decision confidence.

2.7 Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy (CDMSE)

Career-related decision-making mirrors academic choices, with CDMSE being a critical component. Betz and Hackett (2006), along with Choi et al. (2012), provide validated CDMSE scales. Investigations in Malaysia (Salleh et al., 2019) and Tanzania (Pedersen et al., 2022) illustrate that demographic factors influence self-efficacy and decision-making. Frontiers studies (Wang et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2022) link CDMSE to employability, mediated by EI, suggesting a broader framework for student growth.

2.8 Self-Actualization–Decision-Making Link in Educational Research

Janis and Mann's (2000) psychological analysis connects self-actualization qualities—such as self-esteem and problem-solving—with effective decision-making. Baiocco and Mann (2021) reinforced these correlations specifically in adolescent groups, showing decision skills predicted 57% of self-actualization variance. Relatedly, materials science researchers found robust positive relationships between self-actualization and decision capabilities among secondary students (Janis & Mann, 2021).

2.9 Higher Education Context and Cultural Influences

Pakistani studies by Zeeshan and Ali (2020), Altaf et al. (2022), and Yousaf and Usman (2022) highlight the cultural nuances in decision styles (e.g., interdependence vs. autonomy) and how EI and self-concept interrelate with decision-making. Globally, Gunarto and Hurriyati (2020) showed that student experience and co-creation in Indonesia improved engagement and decision confidence. Meanwhile, McConvey et al. (2023) caution towards algorithm-based decision systems lacking human-centered oversight, indicating the need for student agency in decision tools.

The summarized literature underscores that self-actualization, emotional intelligence, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, reflective pedagogy, and cultural/contextual factors collectively enhance decision-making in educational settings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-method approach was employed combining quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs).

3.2 Population and Sample

The study surveyed 500 undergraduate and postgraduate students from five universities in Sindh, Pakistan—three public and two private institutions. Purposive sampling ensured representation across gender, disciplines, and year of study.

3.3 Instruments

- **Self-Actualization Scale** (adapted from Jones & Crandall, 1986).
- **Decision-Making Styles Inventory** (Scott & Bruce, 1995).
- FGD protocols designed to gather student perspectives on how education influences personal growth.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through:

- Online questionnaires distributed via Google Forms.
- In-person FGDs with 40 volunteer students.

3.4 Data Analysis Tools

- SPSS 26 for statistical analysis.
- Thematic analysis for qualitative data.

3.5 Tools and Techniques of Data Estimation with Tables

Table No 1: Demographic Distribution

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male / Female	240 / 260	48% / 52%
Academic Discipline	Social Sci./Science	300 / 200	60% / 40%
Year of Study	Undergraduate/Postgrad	350 / 150	70% / 30%

Table No 2: Mean Scores of Self-Actualization and Decision-Making

Discipline	Self-Actualization (Mean)	Decision-Making (Mean)
Social Sciences	4.2	4.0
Sciences	3.8	3.7

Table No 3: Pearson Correlation Coefficient

Variables	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Self-Actualization & Decision-Making	0.76	0.000**

4. Results and Interpretation

The quantitative data reveal a strong positive correlation between self-actualization and decision-making skills ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.01$). Students with higher self-actualization scores displayed better judgment, greater confidence, and enhanced problem-solving abilities. Social science students showed slightly higher self-actualization, possibly due to greater exposure to human-centered learning.

FGDs corroborated these findings, with participants emphasizing the role of faculty mentorship, exposure to real-world issues, and autonomy in academic tasks as key contributors to self-growth. Female students, in particular, highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence and resilience.

5. Conclusion

The study confirms that self-actualization significantly enhances decision-making abilities among university students. Institutions that nurture self-awareness, autonomy, and purpose enable learners to make better academic, social, and professional choices. Gender, discipline, and socio-economic factors influence this relationship, underscoring the need for inclusive and adaptable educational strategies.

5.1 Policy Recommendations

1. **Curriculum Integration:** Introduce self-actualization modules in general education courses.
2. **Mentorship Programs:** Develop peer and faculty mentoring systems.
3. **Emotional Intelligence Training:** Offer workshops on emotional regulation and ethical decision-making.
4. **Student Reflection Journals:** Encourage reflective practices to build self-awareness.
5. **Faculty Training:** Equip educators to support student psychological development.

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