

NARRATIVES OF SELF-AUTHORSHIP: HOW A GRADUATE FROM AN EFL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME BECAME A BUSINESS WOMAN AND A WEDDING HOST

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Abstract: Self-authorship is the capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations, which forms a developmental foundation for twenty-first-century learning outcomes and is often reported in the stories of college graduates (Baxter Magolda, 2007). This narrative study explores self-authorship manifested in career pathways and experiences of an alumnus from an EFL teacher training programme of a prestigious training institution. Narrative interviews were conducted to collect the participant's stories. Adopting the three dimensions of self-authorship and the four-phase framework of self-authorship development for analyzing in-depth narratives of the participant, the researchers constructed two mini-stories to present two main themes, namely the first job experience and the final career choice. The themes illustrate the development of self-authorship, and the study calls for education institutions to provide students with more opportunities to develop self-authorship.

Keywords: alumni research, self-authorship, career paths, narratives

1. Introduction

EFL teacher education programmes have recently been under scrutiny for the career outcomes of their graduates (Burke & Ceo-DiFrancesco, 2022). Both pre- and in-service teachers in Vietnam are facing increasing challenges in the context of the country's recent implementation of teacher professional standards as well as the uncertainty of the labor market (Canh, 2022). There are several reasons for their struggling, but a crucial one is the lack of certainty in their career choice, as evident in a research published in 2001 which stated that many college students are unclear about their own beliefs, identities, and values (Baxter Magolda, 2001). As a result, many graduates lack employability skills and obvious awareness of career orientation (Bouilheres, 2016; Tuyet, 2016).

College outcomes necessary for successful practice in twenty-first-century life include knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning (the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007). To achieve these outcomes, college students must shift from uncritical acceptance of external authority to critical analysis of authority in order to establish their own internal authority or self-authorship. The linkage between self-authorship and college learning outcomes is clearly depicted in the stories of college graduates who are now managing their adult lives (Baxter Magolda, 2007). Participants in Baxter Magolda's longitudinal study

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of young adult development and learning study (2001) expressed that college learning focused on knowledge and intellect is insufficient for mature adult functioning because college classrooms are a much more controlled environment than what is actually going on outside. However, little is known about how self-authorship manifests in the career paths of college graduates and its linkages to college learning experience. Indeed, there is research on self-awareness of secondary students in Vietnam (Tu, 2019) but it is hard to find research on self-authorship of college students. Besides, qualitative methods are recognized as an essential contributor to career development research (Blustein, 2006; Koegel, Donin, Ponterotto, & Spitz, 1995). Thus, this study aims to explore the development of self-authorship in career paths of 10 college graduates from an EFL teacher training programme through a qualitative approach. This paper presents the development of self-authorship of only one participant.

2. Self-Authorship Dimensions

The concept of self-authorship comes from Kegan's (1994) theory of evolving self which suggests that the primary developmental task in adulthood is the achievement of self-authorship which is a shift of meaning-making capacity from outside the self to inside the self.

This new whole is an ideology, an internal identity, a self-authorship that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer authored by them, it authors them and thereby achieves personal authority. (Kegan, 1994, p. 185)

Baxter Magolda's longitudinal study of self-authorship noted that Kegan's concept of self-authorship captured much of what the participants experienced in the years following their graduation and this complicated phenomenon could be regarded as both "an ability to construct an internal identity separated from external influences without a loss of one's internal identity" (1998, p.12).

According to these authors, self-authorship is achieved when the integration of three dimensions occurs: epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. The epistemological dimension is defined in terms of an individual's ability to seek out and construct new knowledge (Kegan, 1994) and make meaning (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). This is when individuals answer the question "How do I know?" and consider 'the nature of knowledge' and realise that 'what was right or wrong was not an absolute' (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007, p. 196). The intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship is the ability to have a degree of autonomy and be freed from an external authority (Kegan, 1994). This is when individuals craft a sense of self that regulates their interpretation of experience and choices. Finally, interpersonal construct is the "capacity to engage in authentic, interdependent relationships with diverse others in which self is not overshadowed by need for others' approval (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 8). In other words, it is when individuals maintain "healthy relationships" with others (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007, p. 8).

Baxter Magolda's (2001) longitudinal qualitative study of young adults expressed concerns around three central questions, namely "How do I know?", "Who am I?", and "What relationships do I want?". The questions represent three distinct yet interrelated elements of self-authorship: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments. They correspond to three dimensions, epistemological (what to believe), intrapersonal (how to view one's self), and interpersonal (how to manage relationships), which constitute the basic components of self-authorship theory as stated above.

Magolda's study also produced the most popular framework for understanding the evolution of self-authorship, which includes four phases: following external formulas, the

crossroads, becoming the author of one’s life, and internal foundations. The following table summarizes the main characteristics of these four phases.

Stage	Description & Characteristics
Following External Formulas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept beliefs and plans from authority figures • Define self through external roles and relationships with others • Act to acquire approval from others
The Crossroads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question accepted beliefs; see need for own vision • Sense dissonance between external roles and internal identity • Realize need for more balance in relationships
Becoming the Author of One’s Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grow trust in own belief system and internal voice • Begin formulating coherent personal identity • Reframe relationships with others to achieve mutuality
Internal Foundations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rely on internal belief system and chosen values • Achieve personally defined, stable, and congruent identity and sense of self • Construct interdependent relationships with others

(Adapted from Baxter Magolda, 2001)

Individuals in the first phase behave and make decisions based on the perspectives they have uncritically accepted from others (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2009). In this way, the individuals are just an “audience” to their own experiences and only begin the journey to self- authorship by entering the next phase: the crossroads. This phase is referred to as a “snapping point” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 116), a “provocative moment” (Pizzolato, 2005, p. 625), and a “catalyzing” experience (Pizzolato, p. 625). In Magolda’s study (2001), the participants trusted their internal voices, which heightened their ability to take ownership of how they made meaning of external events when they stood at “the crossroads”, suffering provocative experiences and becoming dissatisfied with their future plans or lack of success. The movement to the crossroads phase was often triggered by a change in environments (Torres, Hernandez, & De Sawal, 2007). When individuals begin to exercise personal authority and breach the threshold of self-authorship, they enter the next phase of their development: becoming the author of one’s life. The move from the previous to this life phase is often triggered by a personal crisis that causes them to better recognize their own decision-making and meaning-making abilities (Torres, Hernandez, & De Sawal, 2007). In the last phase, individuals find stability in their self-concept and in mutual relationships, they discover that their life decisions are based on their own beliefs (internal foundation). This foundation becomes the basis of one’s self-authored orientation.

This study adopts Kegan & Baxter Magolda’s self-authorship concept and Baxter Magolda’s (2001) four phase framework of self-authorship development to understand the development of self-authorship depicted in the participant’s narratives of her career.

3. Methods

This research used narrative inquiry methodology with the epistemological assumptions that knowledge is co-constructed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry involves the examination of experiences and stories lived and told (Creswell, 2007). Narrative inquiry framework embraces three dimensions (time, space and interaction), thereby being parallel with the concept of self-authorship. The space or situation dimension relates to geographical places of the narration. The “time” or the temporality dimension focuses on exploring participants’ previous experiences, present engagement, and future plans. This dimension requires participants to look backward and forward to see the continuity of critical incidents, connecting earlier experiences with current happenings and looking forward to the future and experiences that might be anticipated, which reveals how participants shifted meaning making from external formulas into internal ones. The interactional dimension also resonates with the interpersonal dimension of self-authorship, in which inward emotions, hopes, and desires and outward interaction and existential environment can be emerged. Moreover, this approach is “best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 55). Hence, the researchers were able to delve deeply into the participant’s stories of career paths, with the hope of better understanding of how self-authorship was shaped and its linkage with the college experiences.

Unstructured interviews were used as the main method of data collection as meaning of behaviors and events in people’s lives were conveyed in the natural flow of a conversation (Patton, 2002). Chronological narrative form was used to tell the story from beginning to end, make sense of it as a whole before participants are comfortable with taking it apart to provide further details (Weick, 1995). The researchers let the participant choose the beginning and ending of her story and tie them together to make their point. The researchers’ role then was to follow up and ask questions. In this way the interviews appeared in both chronology and theme.

4. Context and the Participant

This study belongs to a broader project involving alumni of a prestigious teacher training institution in Hanoi. Purposive sampling was first used to target the participants of certain criteria (Creswell, 2007). Here the alumni aged 22 to 35 with various career paths were identified and selected from the school alumni list of the EFL teacher education programme. Those aged 22 to 35 were chosen because at these ages people tend to change careers (Dorsett & Lucchino, 2018). The information of the project was sent to all alumni with the above criteria. Only ten people finally contacted us and voluntarily participated in the study. Consequently, they were chosen as participants of this study.

The participant reported in this article, Lam (pseudonym), graduated from an EFL teacher education program of a prestigious training organization in 2007. She taught English for both major and non-major students at a state tertiary institution for about a year before stopping teaching completely. Then she worked as a project assistant for an environment project for about two and a half years while studying MBA. After the project had finished, she decided not to apply for a position in another project, but started a business on her own. Her business on making wedding dresses has run quite well since then. Recently, she also works as a wedding host. Lam’s in-depth narratives were chosen for this study because her diverse career pathways and her ability to articulate her innermost thoughts offered a clear view of the process of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1998).

5. Data Collection and Analysis

Unstructured interviews including four interview sessions were carried out throughout two years. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. The language of the interview chosen by the participant was Vietnamese. After each interview, the researchers transcribed the session and sent the documents to the participant for verification and further clarification. Narrative analysis is both inductive and deductive (Creswell, 2007). Inductively, the researchers searched for recurring themes related to the participant's occupational experiences. Deductively, the researchers looked for themes related to self-authorship development. Finally, the researchers began to "re-story" or reorganize participants' narratives into mini-stories with a focus on the specific time, space, and characters involved. A sequence of narratives was made, which fits Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: the personal and social (the interaction); the past, present, and future (continuity); and the place (situation) and is based on the developmental phases of self-authorship theory (e.g., the crossroads).

The constructed narratives were shared with the participant for further data additions, amendments, and clarifications. In this way, the narratives can be described as being co-constructed by the participants and researchers. Full involvement with the participants in this way yielded close rapport and deep understanding. Clandinin and Connelly emphasized that researchers "must also step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well as the larger landscape on which they all live" (2000, p. 81). Therefore, perspectives of the researchers were brought to the interpretation yet simultaneously worked to be true to participants' narratives, which ensured the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

6. Findings and Discussion

Following the three dimensions of self-authorship and the four-phase framework of self-authorship development, two themes in the participants' narratives were identified, which corresponds to the development framework of self-authorship. The themes are presented below in two stories featuring her choice of the first job, and her success in the wedding business.

6.1. *Provocative Experiences in the First Job*

This story of Lam's early career reveals her development of self-authorship from her tendency to "follow external formulas" to her reconstruction of self-perception leading to reactions in difficult circumstances. After graduation Lam applied for a teaching position in a state tertiary school and got her first job here. She taught English for both major and non-major students. She quitted the job after a year.

The participant decided to apply for a teaching position in a state tertiary institution right after her graduation because EFL teaching is her major and teaching was said to be a good job. "I didn't think much. I graduated with a bachelor degree in EFL teaching. I thought I liked it. My parents and friends also thought it was a good job. They were really happy for me when I got this position" (interview 1, hour 1, minute 30). In the third interview, when Lam went back to the stories around the time she just graduated, she insisted that she had never thought about other career than teaching mainly because teaching was supposed to be a "proper job" for her. Apparently, the participant was likely to be at the first phase of self-authorship construct "following external formulas" as she took "the form of prescribed plans or predetermined scripts for success in adult life" that she learnt from others around her (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

However, “the stance of being shaped by our surroundings is actually insufficient to handle modern life”, an individual should be able to provide insight into why he/she reacts to certain situations (Kegan, 1994, p.132). To accomplish this task, individuals begin the journey to self- authorship by entering the next phase: the crossroads, which is often triggered by a change in environment and provocative experiences. Actually, a number of provocative experiences in the first job stimulated the development of self-authorship of the participant, which could be defined as developmental crises that challenged the participant’s current ways of knowing and conceptions of self. This can be considered one “crossroads” in becoming self-authored. This is when she could not make decisions based on perspectives she had “uncritically accepted from others” (Hodge, Baxter Magolda, & Haynes, 2009, p. 16). The following narrative excerpt exemplifies dissatisfied experiences of the participant in her first job, a teaching position in a tertiary institution.

I think my working environment wasn’t healthy enough. I didn’t align with the school regulations which were somehow out-of-date. I need more autonomy in my teaching. Moreover, I think my effort and devotion I put in class were not recognized. The salary was not adequate, either. However, I couldn’t change the system and it was worth nothing going around blaming everything. (Interview 1, hour 1, minute 10)

These experiences were coded as provocative which stimulated the participant to reconsider her goals and conceptions of self. In fact, language teachers in their early career stage are likely to suffer identity struggles and professional burnout (Huang & Yip, 2021). In Vietnam, the salary of EFL teachers is still low while they are simultaneously in charge of many tasks, both academic and non-academic such as doing research, proctoring, organizing faculty extra activities (Gross, 2016). Lam also reflected that:

I know I loved teaching. I found joy in inspiring students. My students also expressed their gratitude and some of them still keep in contact with me until now. Teaching in an institution is a stable job. Everyone told me that. But I didn’t want to compromise anymore. When I realised that the working environment didn’t fit me, I opted out of it although I still loved teaching. As I said earlier, the salary at school was not adequate so many teachers had to work after school-hours, taking advantage of the reputation of the school to apply for other jobs. I didn’t feel it was right and didn’t want to work and live like that. After all, I decided to drop the teaching job at school. (Interview 1, hour 2, minute 20)

Lam added that she gradually grew to love teaching after she started her first teaching job. However, when she arrived at the time of dissonant experiences, she had to reconsider what was important to her and what working environment she wanted. She realized the love for teaching was not enough and it was not as “wonderful” as she was informed by others. She finally realized such a working environment is not for her. She believed that she needed more autonomy in teaching and teachers deserved better salary with their effort and contribution. She strongly believed that changes must take place and decided to act accordingly.

According to Kegan (1994), development occurred as individuals achieved the capability to recognize different aspects of themselves and their surroundings as objects (rather than them being the subjects) and thus came to exercise conscious control over those elements.

When I quit the teaching job at school, I had to think carefully about what was important, what was the essence of me. I asked myself what I wanted and didn’t want. I started to think about the essence of myself and how I could step out of my comfort zone. After leaving the job, I worked several jobs, including being a free-lance interpreter, a television host, and a project assistant. I even signed up for an MBA course of project management while working for an environment project as a project assistant. (Interview 1, hour 2, minute 20)

Trusting one's internal voice meant knowing herself deeply enough to determine when to make things happen versus when to let them happen to live life on her own terms (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Lam's characters developed during her college but not until graduation did she start to reflect on her own inner self and construct her own formulas. She became more flexible and open when she was accepted into the fast-track programmer during her pre-service teacher training. Her self-efficacy was improved by her participation in diverse school activities such as art and dance club. However, she was never in such a provocative crisis which forced her to reconstruct her belief and her "framework around a new, internally defined sense of self" (Pizzolato, 2005, p.635). Most participants in similar studies (e.g., Alkathiri, 2019; Amechi, 2015; Magolda, 2001) were found to negotiate this crossroads in their 20s. Such negotiations focused on finding and listening to their internal voice, gaining confidence in expressing it, and letting go of external noise in their life. However, none of them had begun to move beyond the external formulas phase in college before they graduated and spent their early years after graduation at this phase. This is similar to the participant in this study. Other empirical studies have also linked a range of different collegiate environments or experiences to propel students toward self-authorship at the provocation of the crossroads phase. These include students' experiences in activities such as service-learning (Jones & Abes, 2004); students' choice of majors and careers (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005); students' negotiation of social and personal identities (Abes, 2003).

6.2. Defining Her Own Path in Life

The second story features the participant's decisions on job change as she stepped out of her comfort zone and her discovery of other passions could be considered as her transformation in self-authorship. After Lam stopped teaching completely, she found the jobs in which she could use her major knowledge and skills. She worked as an interpreter, a television host, and a project assistant. These jobs gave her diverse work experience. She even took an MBA course on project management. In those days, apart from working, her interest in wedding dresses gradually rekindled, motivating her to open her first wedding dress store after about two years working for an environmental project. Although there were ups and downs, her store has been run quite well. Then it was not only about wedding dresses but also Ao dai for engagement ceremonies and for other occasions. She even tried her hand at hosting weddings, especially bilingual ones and has been rather successful at it.

The participant's internal voice of authority grew strong enough to begin overcoming external influences, which led to her decision to drop the teaching job. This could be considered as the third phase of self-authorship evolution. The participant continued to display a high degree of self-authorship when she decided to start her own business after two years working in an environmental project. She recollected that unlike the first job she had no provocative experiences in this job. However, she did not want to follow others' system, as she wanted to create her own one. Moreover, she began to think more long-term, and turned her focus toward creating both an internal and physical foundation for her life.

After the project work had ended, I apparently could apply for other projects. However, I decided to create my own one. I realized my passion for making wedding dresses, and I told myself it was time for me to pursue my dream. Starting a business of making wedding dresses was extremely challenging to a newbie like me. I believed I could do it, though. I also had the whole-hearted support of my parents and friends in this exploration. (Interview 2, hour 1, minute 15)

Her internal desire and wisdom provided her with self-confidence necessary to structure

her external environment in a way that best fits her needs and interests. This decision could be seen as stemming from internal wisdom.

“I spent hours reading fashion magazines and wedding dress collections. I couldn’t forget the stunning look I saw on every model. I think I also know quite a lot about fabric because my mom owned a small clothing repair shop”, Lam recollected (Interview 2, hour 1, minute 20). Indeed, she unconsciously equipped herself with general knowledge of wedding dress design and fashion trends as her interest in such things gradually grew. In this way, individuals come to live with the knowledge base of their respective fields, merging it with their internal sense of themselves and their social relations (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

Lam’s internal foundation was also constructed by acknowledging her giftedness in creativity and communication. She said that her major was not fashion design, so when she started her business of making dresses, she did not take designing dresses as her main strength. The selling point of her business, instead, lies in the pleasant communication with customers, the comfortable atmosphere she has provided to customers. When the business grew better, she had time to take free-lance jobs as a wedding host, especially for international weddings. She described it as “opening the door” to using her talents in her professional and personal life. She reflected,

“I know I’m not a kind of “college-trained” wedding dress designer. I started this business because of my passion with wedding dress. But I know what I’m good at. I’m a good presenter and a good listener at the same time. I also know what value I want to bring to my customers.... The good relationship between me and my customers gave me the opportunity to be a wedding host, especially to be a bilingual wedding host because of my advantages in foreign languages.” (Interview 2, hour 1, minute 30)

This well-developed internal foundation phase allows her the freedom to act, watch what happens, and be confident that she can make something positive take place (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Self-authorship involves each person determining for himself or herself how to construct mutually beneficial relationships. Thus, self-authoring individuals do not separate from others but rather reconstruct their relationships to be more authentic. As mentioned above, the participant enjoyed the support from her parents and friends along the way she was exploring her career paths. When starting her own business, she was always certain about the ways she communicated with customers and the bond she would build. She always made sure that customers would feel like being at home and talking to a best friend.

Lam’s conscious quest for more meaning of success helped her continually build her internal foundation. She demonstrated a personalized sense of value and meaning. As for her, success means daring to do what you want and being able to live on it. She also values relationships which she has continuously been building, relationships with people around her (parents and friends), relationships with her staff and customers. Though, she believes that the fore and foremost element of her success is relying on herself, her endurance, love and passion. Although this foundation was internal, personal, and subjective, it was not “selfish or self-centered; it involves careful consideration of external perspective and others’ needs, but this consideration occurs in the context of one’s internal foundation” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p.19). The participant understood her internal commitments to living them. She trusted that she could make the most of what she could control.

7. Conclusion

This study explores how self-authorship shapes one's career paths of an alumnus from an EFL teacher education programme, which could be illustrated through two mini-stories: having provocative experiences in the first job and defining her own path in life. Three dimensions of self-authorship (epistemology, intrapersonal, interpersonal) and four phases of self-authorship development (following external formulas, the crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, internal foundations) emerged from participants' stories and were intertwined within these stories. The participant still followed external formulas when she decided to take her first job and started to reflect on her internal foundation (what she believes and how she views herself) when she encountered provocative experiences in her first job. It grew strong enough to create a drastic change in her career paths, from an EFL teacher to a successful business woman and a wedding host. The way she trusted herself and built relationships with other people also led to the success in her business and her life. It parallels with Baxter Magolda's study (2001) that young adults' life after college graduation requires self-authorship when they face provocative situations at which they start to develop their self-authorship. Self-authorship development also enhanced the success of the participants in terms of their academic self-efficacy, and their ability to cope effectively with and respond to adversity.

This study cannot be generalized to others, but people can find the resonance. Understanding these nuances also helps educators' abilities to conceptualize how to support young adults in becoming self-authoring. College is a prime context in which to illustrate accurately the complexity of adult life and introduce provocative experiences or dissonant situations which cause students to reconsider their previously taken-for-granted ideas (Torres, Hernandez, & De Sawal, 2007). These include students' experiences in activities such as service-learning (Jones & Abes, 2004); students' choice of majors and careers (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005); students' negotiation of social and personal identities (Abes, 2003). Introducing college students to complexity and enabling them to deal with it meaningfully promotes self-authorship that leads toward inner wisdom. Moreover, it shows how students' initial perspectives and ways of engaging in these experiences are valuable in helping them make sense of their experiences, and how their interpretation of their experiences reflects growth in their career paths.

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NGHIÊN CỨU TƯỜNG THUẬT VỀ NHẬN THỨC TỰ CHỦ: CÂU CHUYỆN CỦA MỘT CỤU SINH VIÊN NGÀNH SƯ PHẠM TIẾNG ANH TRỞ THÀNH MỘT DOANH NHÂN VÀ MỘT NGƯỜI DẪN CHƯƠNG TRÌNH LỄ CƯỚI

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Tóm tắt: Nhận thức tự chủ là khả năng xác định niềm tin, bản sắc và các mối quan hệ xã hội của một người, tạo thành nền tảng phát triển cho các mục tiêu học tập của thế kỷ 21 và thường được các nghiên cứu tìm thấy khi phân tích câu chuyện của những sinh viên đã tốt nghiệp đại học (Baxter Magolda, 2007). Nghiên cứu tự sự này tìm hiểu nhận thức tự chủ được thể hiện trong con đường sự nghiệp và trải nghiệm của một cựu sinh viên ngành Sư phạm tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập từ những buổi phỏng vấn theo phương pháp tường thuật. Hai câu chuyện được xây dựng qua quá trình phân tích dữ liệu, thể hiện hai chủ đề chính. Đó là câu chuyện về những trải nghiệm đầy thử thách trong công việc đầu tiên và câu chuyện về quyết định lựa chọn nghề nghiệp. Những câu chuyện này minh họa cho sự phát triển của nhận thức tự chủ, từ đó, nghiên cứu đưa ra khuyến nghị rằng các cơ sở giáo dục nên cung cấp cho sinh viên nhiều cơ hội hơn để phát triển nhận thức tự chủ.

Từ khóa: nghiên cứu cựu sinh viên, nhận thức tự chủ, con đường sự nghiệp, tự sự