

# Comparing the Vietnamese student's outcomes, motivations and expectations with and without the service learning project integrating in writing course

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*Abstract: Although service learning (SL) is a common educational practice in many international universities, in Vietnam, it is still a new concept. Some universities in Vietnam already offer the service learning, but as an optional course, therefore only a few students, who already aware the benefits of this kind of educational practice, chose the course. However, the attitudes and perception of general students toward SL is under researched. This study, for the first time, integrating the SL in news writing course, a mandatory subject for Public Relations students program at UEF, a university in Vietnam.*

*Key words: Service learning, Vietnam, writing course, comparison, students, UEF*

## Introduction

The SL method is defined as an educational method in which students conduct various activities to fulfil communities' needs (Maher 2003), and through that, practice the skills/knowledge that they have learnt from the course (Bringle and Hatcher 1996, Turnley 2007; Kahl Jr. 2010). This kind of learning is claimed as a tool helps to develop many desired outcomes for students' academic achievements. SL has been applied to all levels and all form of education, even in online and distance education course around the world (Gerholz, Liszt, and Klingsieck 2018). Even though there is a noticeable growth of SL methods in various educational institutions in many countries, in Vietnam, the presence of SL in local universities is still limited. There are only a dozen of universities are applying this teaching method such as the University of Natural Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, Hoa Sen University, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City, the University of Economics and Finance (UEF), etc. Besides that, none of these available courses using SL is in the Media, Communication and PR discipline. Meanwhile, as the Public Relations (PR) industry favors the practical activities, there are many universities around the world have been applying SL (Oster-Aaland, Selnow, Nelson and Pearson 2004) for PR education (Harrison and Bak 2017; Silverman 2012; Webber and Pearson 2015).

However, there is a paucity of lacking in studies on how SL impact the certain skills of PR learners in Vietnam and if the students here are ready for this new learning method. Therefore, this study provides an empirical research about the applicability of this teaching method on PR students to find out the advantages and disadvantages of SL in the context of Vietnam society.

## Literature review

In SL, students participate in organized activities to serve the community by the skills and knowledge they have learnt from certain courses. This learning model helps students get a better understanding of the content of the subject and increasing sense of responsibility about the community (Bringle and Hatcher 1995).

SL model has been proven to bring many benefits to both teachers and students. The benefits of SL to students include promoting responsibility, trust and care to others (Melchior 1999; Switzer, Simmons, Dew, Regalski, and Wang 1995), developing the teamwork (Astin and Sax 1998), improving learning dynamics (Melchior 1999; Shumer 1997), increasing academic achievement (Scales, Blyth, Berkas and Kielsmeier 2000), improving student satisfaction, increasing students attachment to the university, as well as developing university-community relationships (Eyler et al. 2001). University lecturers who teach SL subjects or implement SL projects also get benefits from these teaching methods such as developing different learning styles (McGoldrick and Ziegert 2008), getting higher efficiency in teaching (Eyler et al. 2001), achieving more advanced professional competencies and getting more research opportunities (Willis 2002).

The community that contributes to SL activities also gets benefits from the service of students, from the professional contributions of teachers and strengthening the relationship with the university (Eyler et al. 2001). The community also increases human resources from the students to promote short-term or long-term goals. (Driscoll, et al 1996; Eyler

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and Giles 1999). The "co-education" role of the community partners also create an opportunity to share the organization's work, vision and purpose to students, creating a positive image in students' views. Meanwhile, in the PR discipline, the educational process must base on social and psychological relevance activities (Bucy 2004). Therefore, PR educators could integrate theory, principles, case studies, and application into various SL projects to provides students an opportunity to practice the learnt knowledge and skills (Texter and Smith 1999). There are also many skills and knowledge, which are necessary for a PR learner, that are suitable for applying in a SL project. For example, the content creating skill for the campaign to increase the awareness of society on certain issues is one of the requirements for PR students. (Andreasen 1994; Fine 1990). Furthermore, in the SL projects, the students will have opportunity to practice and get the feedback from community as well as instructors. Therefore, it was expected that the writing skills would be developed well for students who participated in SL.

On the other hand, Vietnam is a country that having a large number of blind and visual impaired people. According to the information provided in Marrakesh Treaty workshop in Hanoi in 2019, it is estimated that Vietnam has about 1.03 million blind and visual impaired people. This community is proven as one of the most disadvantaged group in finding an employment opportunity. Martz and Xu (2008) shows that those with the lowest employment rates are people with visual disabilities (78.7%). A study by Darensbourg (2013) also found that job seekers with vision impairment were less likely to be employed than those with other disabilities. Capella (2001) also found that older visually impaired people also tend to receive lower income than other people with disabilities. Meanwhile, the majority of blind people in Vietnam have limited employment opportunities, mainly focusing on the simple labor jobs such as making bamboo toothpicks, making brooms, doing massage, etc ... of which the massaging happens to be the most popular job for this community (Nhu Lich 2019). However, many occupations have been taught to the blinds but are no longer suitable because they cannot compete in the labor market (Thanh Dong 2018). In that context, there is the need to improve the awareness of society toward this community as the blind and visual impaired people still meet many difficulties in Vietnam. To do that, the SL center of UEF in conjunction with Nhat Hong Center, organized the Blindness and Visual Impaired Disability Awareness Project in which Public Relations Students of UEF participated in a writing course.

There are four hypotheses in this study intended to test the relationship between the writing skills of students and the SL.

Hypothesis 1. Participating in a SL project increases students' writing skills.

Hypothesis 2. Participating in a SL project increase the awareness of students toward the disadvantage community.

Hypothesis 3. Students prefer to participate in a SL project than traditional projects

Hypothesis 4. Students are ready for this educational tool and thus SL should be applied in larger scale.

## **Methodology**

### ***The Blindness and Visual Impaired Disability Awareness Project***

In Vietnam, currently, there are many centers having programs to support the blindness and visually impaired people. In which, one of those centers located in Ho Chi Minh city is the Nhat Hong Center for Blind and Visually Impaired People. This is one of the largest centers in Vietnam specializing in supporting and education for visually impaired children. The center has been trying to create many job opportunities for the children here. For example, the center has opened a small bakery, called Happy Sun Bakery to create regular income for the visually impaired mates. These staffs produce various bakery products including bread, cakes and sweet dessert. The current major difficulty of that bakery shop is that very few customers are aware of its existence, so the operation of the shop has not created adequate profit for maintaining this bakery. Therefore, the center needs the marketing and PR activities so that the society gets to know more about the lives and products of the visually impaired staffs in that shop, as that will lead to improved patronage.

However, as the center does not have the funds for this purpose as well coupled with lack of people with suitable skills, Nhat Hong Center need the work from PR students.

This center is working with UEF in a project called as Blindness and Visual Impaired Disability Awareness Project, which includes many small goals. One of them is the Social Marketing for Happy Sun Bakery to increase the visibility of this shop on the market. Therefore, the bakery needs the contribution of UEF students in the role of communicator and marketers.

### ***Procedures and service-learning intervention***

The second year PR students at UEF are required to take the New Writing course (ID: JOU1101), which focuses on teaching writing skills. In 2018 – 2019 academic year, there were two classes with 39 students. At first, all students were encouraged to attend the SL introduction sessions to learn more about this learning method. They include (1) an introduction session about Nhat Hong Center, and the needs of community for the works of students; (2) a sharing session by a famous blind person talking about the difficulties that the blind and visually impaired people have to face every day. After that, students were asked to form teams comprised either five or six persons per group or team. As the school's policy, the students can choose to do the SL project or not, knowing that it will have no impact on their academic results.

This study uses quasi-experiments, with a control group and an experimental group. In the experimental groups, students participated in a SL project (Social Marketing for Happy Sun Bakery), which is a part of the Blindness and Visual Impaired Disability Awareness Project. In the control group, the students did a project consisted of either an in-depth analysis of a business organization or a topic related to student's good works. Both groups were post-tested to examine the effects of the presence of the SL project in the course.

The test group has 8 students (n = 8), which were introduced to SL and decided to do SL project. This group was divided to 2 groups of 4 people for doing different contents for the Social Marketing for Happy Sun Bakery.

The control group has 31 students (n = 31), this group was also introduced to SL, but these students were not allowed to participate in the SL project. This group was divided to 6 groups of 4 -6 people

Both groups attended the same lecturers of the New Writing course, however, for the project, the experimental group was guided by the UEF service learning center and control group is guided by course instructor. Both groups have to produce writing and video content for the project.

These products were evaluated at the end of the course base on basic elements of a newswriting including structure, topic, headline, design. Besides that, the students were also required to complete a survey about the SL at the end of the semester.

### ***Participants***

Male and female students (n = 39), aged 18 to 20 enrolled in News Writing courses. Majority of these students had no experience about SL. However, there are 8% of them who had already participated in the previous project of the UEF service learning center before. The details information of participants is listed in the table below.

Table 1: statistics of gender, age and SL experience of participants

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Male</i>	10	26%
<i>Female</i>	29	74%
<i>Take the SL project</i>	8	21%
<i>Do not take the SL project</i>	31	79%
<i>Have previous experience about SL</i>	3	8%
<i>Do not have previous experience about SL</i>	36	92%

Source: Hoang 2019

### ***Evaluate the results of projects***

To measure the outcome of participating in a SL project, the trainers assessed the results of the written news and video news that both groups had made.

The score scale for these products is assessed as follows:

Adequate number of news: 1 point

The news is written in suitable structure, brief and easy to understand: 3 points

Direct start, clear focus: 2 points

The headline is attractive: 2 points

Interesting and newsworthy topic: 1 point

Professional design: 1 point

Total: 10 points

In addition, students' perception of SL was also surveyed through a questionnaire built on 5 points Likert scale. The questions in this survey are adapted from the 2012-2013 student evaluation report of the Carlson Center, University of Washington (USA), where has been implementing SL projects for over 25 years.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions about integrating SL project into News Writing course, students in both experimental groups and control group were interviewed to understand the reason of choosing or not choosing to participate SL project and the students' concerns about implementing SL project into the course. Besides that, other related parties including the UEF service learning center and staffs at Nhat Hong Center also were interviewed.

## Results

Within 15 weeks of the course, there were four main activities of the SL project conducted in this subject:

November 30, 2018: the students met Sister Le Thi Kim Phung, Director of Nhat Hong Blind and Visually Impaired Center to share stories about the establishment, the vision and mission of this NGO. The center also highlighted the need to be supported in marketing and PR for Happy Sun Bakery.

December 6, 2018: students learned about the difficulties of blind people through the sharing of speaker Nguyen Tuan Tu, a blind man who has reached many good achievements in his life.

December 12, 2018: members of the SL project had a meeting at Happy Sun Bakery. They had chance to learn about the operation of the bakery and were guided by the Sisters at this center to know how to communicate with visual impaired people working at the bakery. At the same time, they worked on the media stories for that NGO, which convey the key message of Happy Sun Bakery about the work of visual impaired staffs at there to make the bakery products.

January 30, 2019: the project "Social Marketing for Happy Sun Bakery" was officially completed. Participating students are awarded the certificate of participation in this SL project.



Figure 1: Sister Le Thi Kim Phung - Director of Nhat Hong Center Gave an Overview of the Center

Source: Hoang 2019



Figure 2: Mr. Nguyen Tuan Tu shared about the Life of the Blind people and How they overcome the difficulties

Source: Hoang 2019



Figure 3: UEF students Working with Community Partner

Source: UEF SL Center 2019



Figure 1: Students Participating in the Service Learning project Received a Certificate

Written article and video clips make by students about the life of blind of visual impaired staffs at Happy Sun Bakery as well as the products that these staffs made are introduced on the Fanpage <https://www.facebook.com/happysunkt.bakery/>

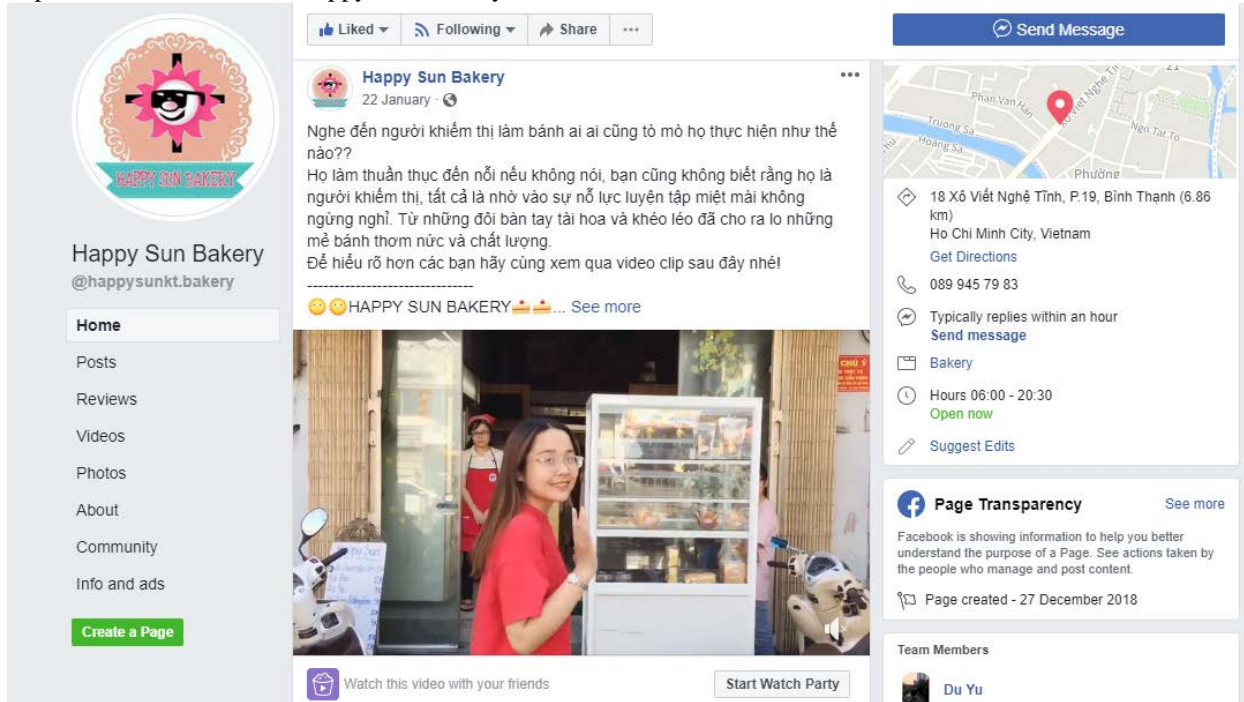


Figure 5: Fanpage to Introduce Products of Happy Sun Bakery and the Lives of Visual Impaired Staffs at there

Source: Hoang 2019

**Evaluate the results of participating in the SL project:**

The unequal variance (Welch) T test were conducted to test the effectiveness of SL learning and traditional learning between experimental groups (students who participated in SL) and control groups (students who did not participate in SL).

For the quality of article, the experimental group have  $M = 8.75$ ; while the control groups have  $M = 8.32$ . Besides that,  $t = 3.6$ ;  $p = 0.002 < 0.5$ , indicating a significant difference between the two groups.

For the quality of video, the experimental groups have  $M = 8.375$ ; while the control groups have  $M = 8$ . Besides that,  $t = 2.04$ ;  $p = 0.07 < 0.5$ , indicating a significant difference between the two groups.

Participating in SL projects shows a positive effect on the quality of written articles and video comparing to the control groups. This result is similar to Kolb's theory (1984) that positively participating in practical experiential learning activities will bring better learning results for students. This result of T-test distribution states that the output perception of the students participated in the SL project is better than the control group. Therefore, the H1 is supported

Table 2: T-Test results (the unequal variance) for the quality of article between the experimental groups and the control groups

	<i>Experimental groups</i>	<i>Control groups</i>
<i>Mean</i>	8.75	8.32580645
<i>Variance</i>	0.071428571	0.159139785

<i>Observations</i>	8	31
<i>Hypothesized Mean Difference</i>	0	
<i>df</i>	16	
<i>t Stat</i>	3.604366085	
<i>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</i>	0.001188592	
<i>t Critical one-tail</i>	1.745883676	
<i>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</i>	0.002377185	
<i>t Critical two-tail</i>	2.119905299	

Source: Hoang 2019

Table 3: T-Test results (the unequal variance) for the quality of article between the experimental group and the control group

	<i>Experimental groups</i>	<i>Control groups</i>
<i>Mean</i>	8.375	8
<i>Variance</i>	0.267857143	0
<i>Observations</i>	8	31
<i>Hypothesized Mean Difference</i>	0	
<i>df</i>	7	
<i>t Stat</i>	2.049390153	
<i>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</i>	0.039801006	
<i>t Critical one-tail</i>	1.894578605	
<i>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</i>	0.079602012	
<i>t Critical two-tail</i>	2.364624252	

Source: Hoang 2019

In addition, in these articles, students who participating in SL project also written positive comments about the blind and visually impaired community in their articles, which the control groups did not have:

“Located at 18 Xo Viet Nghe Tinh, the small Happy Sun bakery has remained simple for many years in the bustle of the city. This place is not only special about the cakes but also about the talented and energetic bakers ”.

“Looking at the achievement of the continuous efforts, sister is happy for herslef and for the visually impaired children. She is happy because she can give them a new, more stable job.”

“Think about how your life become when you cannot see anything? Think about your favorite cake, how will you enjoy it when you don't see it? Above all, think about when you can make a miracle in the dark like a cake at Happy Sun”

Participating in the SL project also helps students to have better understanding toward the blind and visual impaired community and to write positive comments about this community in their articles. It enhance the sympathy of students, which is also the purpose of the SL method, to help students complete their personality (Duran 1983), supporting H2.

### ***Survey results of students' perception about SL***

In addition, the students were also surveyed to assess their perception about the SL method including their usefulness and readiness toward this educational tool.

According to the survey, most of the students were satisfied with the presence of SL project in this subject (average score = 4.23 / 5). In contrast, if the course did not have the SL project, most of the students said that they could not get the knowledge better (average score = 1.97 / 5). Most students believe that the SL method affects their future

career and study choices (average score = 3.95 / 5). Besides that, most of the students said that they wanted SL projects to continue to integrate SL in the course News Writing in the future (average score = 4.26 / 5). Most students also feel that SL is a good learning method and they will introduce SL to their relatives and friends (average score = 4.33 / 5). These results supports the H3 of this study.

However the connection between SL and the object of this course is still not significant closely (average score = 3.54 / 5). In addition, the students are not really interested in combining SL projects for other subjects at UEF (average score = 3.36 / 5).

The students were also asked about the strengths and weaknesses of this method of learning. What students like about SL is it will increase their marks in UEF'S behavior assessment score (an assessment to evaluate the attitude of students at this university), accounting for 46% of the survey results. In addition, the feeling of contributing for the community is also one of the factors that helps students to decide to participate in SL (accounting for 36% of the survey results). The attractiveness of SL project is only ranked last in total 3 factors to help students choose SL (accounting for 18% of survey results). Meanwhile, the factor that students do not like most in SL is that they feel this learning method takes too much their time (accounting for 82% of survey results). In addition, some students said that they did not fully understand the meaning of SL method (accounting for 18% of survey results). It can be seen that the H4 is not supported in this study.

Table 4: Results of survey on students' perception about the strengths and weaknesses of the SL project in the course

News Writing.

<i>Favourite things about SL</i>		
<i>Attractiveness</i>	7	18%
<i>Earning behaviour assessment points</i>	18	46%
<i>Doing good work</i>	14	36%
<i>Un-favourite things about SL</i>		
<i>Not understanding the meaning of SL</i>	7	18%
<i>Wasting too much time</i>	32	82%

Source: Hoang 2019

**Results of interviewing students**

Interview results on 10 students: 05 people participated in Project SL in the course News Writing, the other 05 did not participate in this project to find out the reasons why they chose to participate and not participate in the SL project as well as the challenges they encountered during the implementation SL project.

Those who did not joined the SL project are concerned that participating in this project will take a lot of their time, although they think this project is a meaningful activity for the community.

"I also want to do this project but I have the part-time work after studying"

"Now I don't have much time, I will probably participate next time."

Even those involved in the SL project also said that this SL project takes too much of their time.

"Every week I have to meet up with the SL project participants. They talked a lot and I didn't know when the meeting will end. "

"Sometimes I feel depressed because my participation in the SL takes up too much time."

Regarding the challenges that the participants of SL met, it includes no clear orientation, seeing that writing for Fanpage has different requirements than News Writing, and the insufficient time to meet the community.

"I don't know how to write articles so that I can meet the requirements of the news and do the communicate job for Happy Sun Bakery"

"I think writing on Fanpage is different from News Writing. Writing on Fanpage needs to be brief, attractive while writing news that requires structure and content".

"I only met Happy Sun Bakery a few times because it was so small that there was no place for us."

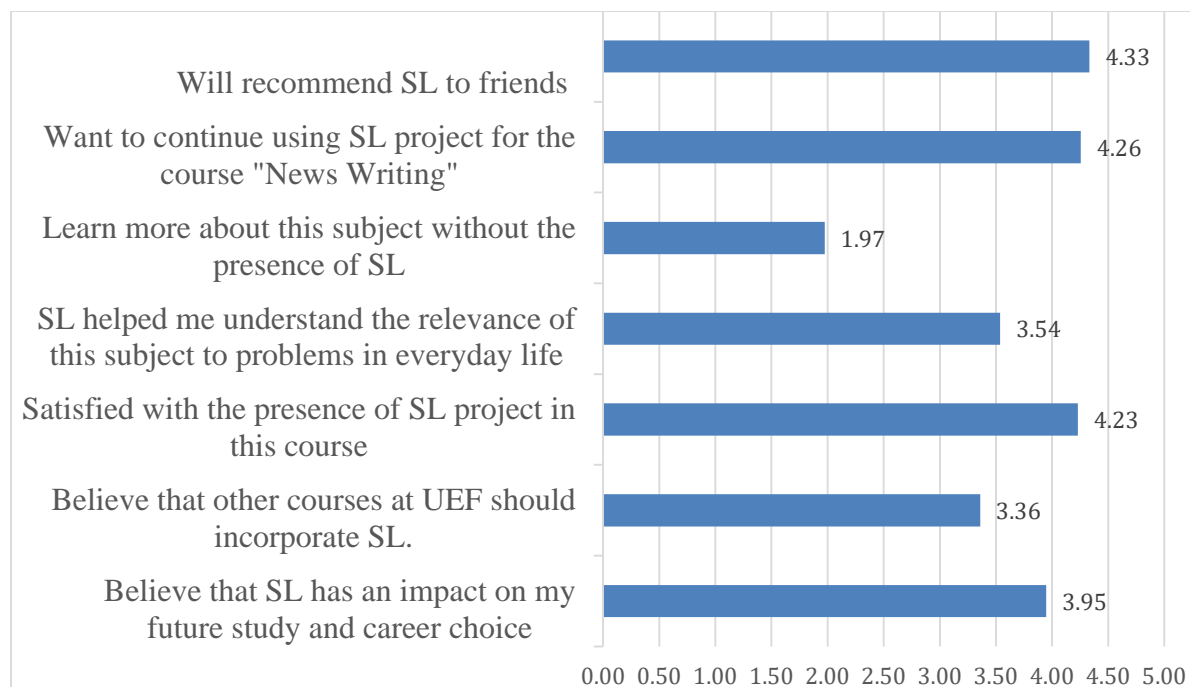


Figure 6: Survey results of students' perception about SL project in the course News Writing, in which 1 is Very disagree; 2 is Disagree; 3 is Not agree nor disagree; 4 is Agree; 5 is Very agree

Source: Hoang 2019

### ***Results of interviewing community***

Sister Le Thi Kim Phung was interviewed to see if the works of students really bring any benefits to Happy Sun Bakery. She stated that the profits of the bakery had increased after the campaign and there are more customer have come to know about this bakery shop. Sister Phung said:

“I’m happy with the contribution of students”, “I hope to work with them in the future”.

### ***Results of interviewing the service learning center of UEF***

The staff at the UEF service learning center is unhappy about the performing of students. She said: “there are students who still arrive late for the meetings”. Regarding to the quality of the articles, she said that she satisfy with them and hope the UEF service learning center will continue to work with students in similar projects in the future.

## **Discussion**

In this study, the effectiveness of the SL project on News Writing course is tested by all three methods: T-test distribution; surveys and in-depth interviews to find out whether the implementation of SL project in this subject would lead to more effective results than the traditional way of learning.

### ***Benefits of SL project in the course News Writing:***

Participating in a SL project increases students' writing skills. It also enhances the awareness of students to the disadvantage community. Most of students prefer to participate in a SL project than traditional projects.

### ***Limitations:***

Although this study shows positive impacts on the development of personality as well as the learning outcomes of students participating in the SL project, some drawbacks have also been noted:



Participating in the SL and doing the reflection every weeks makes UEF students felt it is time-consuming project, so that there were many students choose not to participate in SL even though they also understand the positive contribution of this learning method.

Students still do not understand the importance of storytelling skills in News Writing in the Social Marketing for Happy Sun Bakery.

### ***Next development:***

The integrating of SL project in the course News Writing should continue to be carried out in the following semesters so that more data on student readiness in implementing the SL project can be obtained.

Continue to give students the choice in participating in the SL project because some students need to do part-time work after school time and have no time to join SL

Increasing the level of diversity of SL projects

Introduce more clearly about the goal of the subject and how the skills and knowledge in the course News Writing will support students in writing media content.

Reduce the time to participate in doing reflection in SL project to be more suitable for the needs and time of UEF students.

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### **Appendix**

Table of acronyms

<i>Acronyms</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>Service Learning</i>
<i>UEF</i>	<i>The University of Economics and Finance</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>Public Relations</i>

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