

## Benefits of Vocational Teachers' Participation in Projects under Erasmus+ Programme: The Case of Lithuania

**Aušra Repečkienė**<sup>1</sup> Dr. tech.; **Daiva Vareikaitė**<sup>2</sup> MMgt; **Renata Žvirelienė**<sup>3</sup> Dr. mgmt.  
Kaunas University of Technology Panevėžys Faculty of Technologies and Business, Lithuania<sup>1,3</sup>;  
Public Institution Vocational Training Centre in Panevėžys<sup>2</sup>  
[ausra.repeckiene@ktu.lt](mailto:ausra.repeckiene@ktu.lt)<sup>1</sup>; [daiva.vareikaite@gmail.com](mailto:daiva.vareikaite@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup>; [renata.zvireliene@ktu.lt](mailto:renata.zvireliene@ktu.lt)<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** Embracing the financing opportunities offered by the European Union, vocational schools draw up applications for various projects, mostly for implementation of international partnerships, dissemination of best practices, and exchange programmes, involving the general education and vocational teachers as well as students, student assistance specialists, and school principals. Vocational training institutions generally engage in projects under the Erasmus+ strategic partnership programme aimed at long-term mobility of vocational teachers and other participants of vocational training. When assessing the importance of Erasmus+ projects in the context of vocational training quality in Lithuania, the authors of the paper aimed at identifying the benefits of vocational teachers' participations in projects under the Erasmus+ programme. Seeking for the research objective, a qualitative research approach was selected applying the triangulation principle. Document analysis method was invoked to examine the project activities documents of 26 Lithuanian vocational training institutions. Benefits experienced by vocational teachers experienced in project activities were analysed applying a semi-structured interview for the interviewing of 9 vocational teachers and vocational teachers who served as international project coordinators in more than two national and international projects in 2015–2019. The study revealed that in Lithuania, projects implemented in vocational training institutions having the largest experience of international project activities were associated with vocational teachers' qualification improvement, introduction of innovations, and renovation and expansion of infrastructure. Benefits of involvement in project activities are diverse, starting with improvement of the learning process, relationships with the learners, and vocational teachers become open to changes. The major benefit of project activities gained by vocational teachers is oriented to experiential learning, when learning occurs through personal experience.

**Keywords:** vocational teachers, project activities, benefits, Erasmus+

### Introduction

As Lithuania takes part in the activities of the European Union (EU) investment strategy Europe 2020, one of the thematic objectives of the Operational Programme for the EU Structural Funds Investments for 2014–2020 involves investments in education, capacities, and lifelong learning. The European Social Fund supports projects that deal with social problems and finance education and vocational training, expansion of employment opportunities, research and development, and improvement of education and vocational training systems.

Embracing the financing opportunities offered by EU, vocational schools regularly submit applications for the implementation of various projects. The majority of those are international partnership, best practice dissemination and exchange projects and programmes involving students, student assistance specialists, school principals, and general education and vocational teachers. The international cooperation between stakeholders in education is promoted under Erasmus+ program and supporting projects financially, but “it is more challenging in vocational education and training than it is in higher” education (Kaleja et al., 2017, 74). Despite challenges, the participation of vocational education and training stakeholders in Erasmus+ mobility projects are growing every year.

The Lithuania's Strategy for Internationalisation Development of Vocational Training and Adult Education (Lietuvos profesinio mokymo..., 2019) notes that learning mobility under the Erasmus+ programme takes place under actions KA102 and KA116. The first part of the programme is intended for vocational schools that are not holders of the Mobility Charter, the second – for those which are. The Mobility charter provides to vocational schools a higher added value when searching for international partners and the opportunity to provide applications in accordance with simplified

procedure under the common invitations of Erasmus+ as well as intensify the mobility of teaching institutions. Thus, students of vocational schools, general education and vocational teachers, administrative staff, and other specialists can make use of the opportunities to participate in mobility projects more often.

Erasmus+ activities promote long-term mobility of students and graduates of vocational training institutions through long-term traineeships in companies abroad or institutions of the vocational training services providers. Activities of Key Action 1 (KA1) of Erasmus+ enable not only students and vocational teachers of vocational training institutions to study at an institution of a vocational training services provider abroad, but also extend this opportunity to company employees, thus involving business partners in the vocational training process. The programme of Key Action 2 (KA2) of Erasmus+ enables the development of international partnerships between vocational training institutions in creating new products or distributing the already existing ones that help improving the teaching process and furthering the quality of vocational training and innovations (Lithuania's Strategy for..., 2019).

Vocational training institutions generally implement the strategic partnership programme projects under Erasmus+. Participation in these programmes and projects enables studying, learning and gaining experience abroad. The best practices from previous international mobility projects in vocational education were named as "ICT, communication, interpersonal, foreign language and work-related skills" to be included in vocational teaching (Egetenmeyer et al., 2011, 27). In the course of the project implementation, competence of learning to learn is promoted as well as transformation of the personal attitude to professional activities that is very important when seeking for the integrity of cognitive and metacognitive development dimensions (Linkaitytė et al., 2009). In particular, personal qualities, motivation, innovative approach to one's activities, and eagerness to constantly improve while taking over the best experience of teaching from foreign countries and modern educational technologies of the subjects one teachers of the educators are emphasised (Daukilas et al., 2016). The professional development of teachers is emphasised in early and recent studies (Hamza, 2010; Egetenmeyer et al., 2011; Günbayi et al., 2016; Tran, 2017; de Paor, 2018; Salcedo-López et al., 2021) in the context of internationalisation and mobility. Analysis showed that teachers are more inclined to adopt new practices or methodologies in the class when they are experiencing benefits by themselves (de Paor, 2018; Salcedo-López et al., 2021). *When assessing the importance of Erasmus+ strategic partnership programme projects in the context of vocational training quality in Lithuania, the authors of the paper sought to identify the benefits of vocational teachers' participation in projects under the Erasmus+ programme.*

## Methodology

The research question was defined: what are the benefits for vocational teachers participating in projects under Erasmus + programme? Seeking to attain the research objective, a qualitative research approach was selected applying a triangulation principle. The research was divided into two subsequent stages. In the first stage, analysis of project activities carried out in Lithuanian vocational training institutions in 2015–2019 was conducted invoking a document analysis method. Documents (annual reports of principals, strategic plans, summarised reports of project leaders received by email) of 26 vocational training institutions were examined based on the following criteria: number of vocational training institutions which participated in the project activities, project types, and participants of the project activities and their numbers.

In the second stage, a semi-structured questionnaire was selected seeking to envisage the benefits experienced by vocational teachers who take part in project activities. The sequence of questions established in the interview plan is linked with the benefits of the project activities for the vocational teacher as an individual and for his/her practical activities.

*Instruments and procedures of qualitative research.* Conversation that best allows for disclosure of individual experiences (Mayring, 2000) was applied in the qualitative research identifying the benefits of vocational teachers' participation in Erasmus+ programme projects and *interview method* was selected enabling to come closer to the individual perception, meanings of a phenomenon and construction of reality (Silverman, 2003a, 2003b). Research participants were surveyed using a semi-

structured interview face-to-face, i.e. in the course of the conversation, they were asked open-ended questions.

*Selection of the research sample and justification.* When organising qualitative research, the research sample representativeness (Silverman, 2003a, 2003b) was taken into account. The sample of interviewees was compiled based on the research objective and criteria of the participants, i.e., target or criterion-based selection was applied to select certain individuals deliberately, seeking to obtain important information that could not be otherwise acquired (Kvale, 1996).

When compiling the research sample, the aim was to:

- cover a maximum territory, i.e., the largest vocational training institutions operating in the regions of the country (regions of Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai, Alytus, Panevėžys, Utena, Marijampolė, Tauragė, and Telšiai);
- expediently select the research subjects who are able to provide sufficient information about the issue under consideration.

The qualitative research sample is comprised of the observation subjects who are sufficiently informative in respect of the research and represent the population responsible for the specific activity relevant to the research (Silverman, 2003a, 2003b). In the current research, the target group comprised 9 vocational teachers and vocational teachers who have worked as international project coordinators and participated in more than two national and international projects in 2015–2019 of the vocational training centres with the largest experience in project activities (Alytus Vocational Training Centre (VTC), Public Institution Panevėžys VTC, Kaunas Karalius Mindaugas VTC) and those with less experience in project activities (Vilnius VTC, Tauragė VTC, Šiauliai VTC). The research was conducted in September–October 2020.

When processing the data, each respondent was given a code including the target group [T], case number, and transcribed text page number containing the sample of notional context, i.e. statement.

*Data analysis methods used in qualitative research.* To process the qualitative research data, a *qualitative content analysis method* was applied. According to Kvale (1996), when applying this method, data is analysed by dividing the text into categories and subcategories or separate themes and subthemes. The latter method allowed for distinguishing notional units in the contents of the text being examined, calculating the frequency of their use, and determining the interrelation of individual content elements as well as their relation with the context of the whole contents.

## Results and discussion

**Participation of Lithuanian vocational training institutions in international projects.** Data analysis revealed that Lithuanian vocational training institutions mostly implemented projects under Erasmus+ followed by NordPlus and Interreg Europe as well as national projects of different areas. Popularity of the Erasmus+ programme in project activities of Lithuanian vocational training institutions is related to the need for internationalisation development including intercultural education and development of professional competences in international environment.

When analysing the results of the project activities of 26 Lithuanian vocational training / education centres, it can be seen that schools engage in long-term project activities and substantially more international projects are pursued than national ones (Repečkienė et al., 2020).

Several Lithuanian vocational training institutions – Kaunas Karalius Mindaugas VTC, Panevėžys Margarita Rimkevičaitė VTC, Utena Regional VTC – have prepared their internationalisation strategies enabling the mobility of project participants from vocational training institutions and fulfilment of the requirements posed to vocation schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For the initiative in organising employee mobility and proactive international project activities, several vocational training institutions (Kaunas Karalius Mindaugas VTC, Vilnius VTC of Service and Business Employees) have been awarded internationalisation (mobility) charters by the Education Exchanges Support Foundation.

Lithuanian vocational training institutions generally implement the vocational training mobility projects under key action 1 of Erasmus+: “International experience - assurance of vocational training

quality” (No 2019-1-LT01-KA116-060163) and “International mobility for professional improvement” (No 2018-1-LT01-KA116-046638). Projects intended for the creation, renovation and expansion of school infrastructure could be identified as a separate type of projects implemented in vocational training institutions. For instance, project “Development of vocational training infrastructure” (No 09.1.2.-CPVA-K-722) has been implemented in numerous Lithuanian vocational training institutions. The implementation of this measure was aimed at ensuring high quality of vocational training for youth and adults and its accessibility through investments in infrastructure.

Analysis of project activities of Lithuanian vocational training institutions revealed that in 2015–2019, each of them implemented more than two international projects aimed at developing the general and professional competencies of vocational teachers and students, dissemination of best practices, internationalisation development, promotion of teacher and student mobility and enhancing the vocational training prestige, and at least two national projects carried out throughout the country without involving foreign partners.

When examining the project activities of 10 Lithuanian vocational training institutions in the period of 2015–2019, it can be seen that each institution has implemented at least 10 international projects. The smallest number of national projects – two projects in five years. In one year, each vocational training institution implements at least 1 and as many as 13 international projects. It is noteworthy that the majority of projects extend over a number of years and that is the reason why, for example, projects commenced in 2015 could have been completed in 2019.

In the period of 2015–2019, three vocational training institutions were leaders by the number of international projects continued and implemented: Alytus VTC (53 international projects), Panevėžys VTC (40 international projects), Kaunas VTC (35 international projects). It was noted that numbers of international projects pursued by Panevėžys VTC and Marijampolė VTC were increasing, seeing that schools were involved as partners in implementation of projects initiated by other institutions. Other vocational training institutions (Šiauliai VTC, Marijampolė VTC, Utena Regional VTC) implemented less international projects per year, however more students and teachers have been involved in their activities.

During the period in question, each year, on average 52.44% of vocational teachers from all ten vocational training institutions participated in projects. Vocational teachers of Alytus VTC were involved in international projects the most, representing 58.37% of all vocational teachers employed by the centre. An annual increase of vocational teachers getting involved in project activities was observed. As an example, Marijampolė VTC could be mentioned where the number of vocational teachers participating in projects grew almost 10 times by 2019; the share of students involved in project activities increased too. Similar dynamics of project participants was observed in vocational training centres of Tauragė and Panevėžys.

While carrying out project activities, vocational teachers build international relations and their learning through cooperation is promoted as well as formation of values and attitudes and perception of cultural diversity. It can be stated that project activities in these training institutions are among the most popular teaching/learning methods that help disclose the vocational teachers’ professional and intercultural competences.

**Experience of vocational teachers while participating in project activities.** Experience of project activities is a very important component when assessing professional competences of teachers that helps evaluate the benefits of participation in project activities. Recent study by Tacconi et al. (2021) indicated that participation in the national and international projects (as their work tasks) among Lithuanian vocational teachers are still least frequent. Nevertheless, teachers value participation in project activities as self-expression in their professional work.

In the present research informants’ responses distributed inconsistently, e.g., vocational teachers [T4] and [T5] take part in project activities every year stating that “*I have been actively involved in project activities since 2002 <...>*” [T4;1], “*<...> I take part in one project at least*” [T5;1]. Other vocational teachers who took part in the research, for instance, informant [T1;1], “*<...> took part in international Erasmus+ mobility projects every 3-4 years*”, whereas informant [T9;1] has been involved in projects for a substantial period of time (“*<...> more than 10 years <...>*”). According to informant [T2;3],

“<...> approximately every 2 years <...>, perhaps more often, <...> I always take part in Erasmus+”. It is noteworthy that certain informants tended to take part in project activities as soon as an opportunity presented itself ([T3, T7 and T8]). According to informant [T3;1], “if I have the opportunity and conditions, if I correspond to the target group, I take part as often as practicably possible”. Informant [T7;1] echoed the colleague stating that “if possible, I always participate in project activities. Five projects since 2013”. Informant [T8;2] not just participates in the projects whenever an opportunity arises, but also strives to “<...> initiate the project preparation and search”. As can be seen, vocational teachers are not new to project activities. Informant responses also revealed a fear that they did not have the chance to often participate in projects, as stated by respondent [T6;2]: “<...> i[I]n the last two years, I took part in one international project”.

When analysing the typology of projects, the respondents were generally involved in, it was revealed that vocational teachers participated both in national (“<...> in Lithuania – competence improvement programmes” [T7;2]), and international projects (“<...> Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus+ [T4;2]). It turned out that vocational teachers who took part in the research most often were the participants of projects under Erasmus+ programme aimed at mobility, organisation of educational activities, and competence improvement: “<...> job shadowing mobility, student and staff mobility” [T2;3], “improvement of professional, didactic and social capacities” [T7;2]. According to vocational teachers, “these are profession-related, speciality projects <...>” [T9;2]. Furthermore, the research revealed that teachers not only take part in project activities, but also initiate and draw up the project applications themselves: “since 2002, I have annually prepared and coordinated the EU Education Exchanges Support Foundation projects under Leonardo Da Vinci programme and Erasmus+ as well as social projects <...>” [T8;3].

Thus, most often, vocational teachers participate in the mobility projects for teachers and students under the Erasmus+ programme. The frequency of vocational teachers’ participation in the projects is determined by the intensity of project activities pursued in the vocational training institution and areas of projects implemented. This notwithstanding, all the vocational teachers who took part in the research emphasised that they strove to participate in the projects always, whenever an opportunity arose. This suggests that project activities are a popular method of teaching and learning that promotes the proactiveness of vocational teachers and their motivation for professional activities.

**Benefits of project activities for vocational teacher as an individual.** Scientific literature features positive assessments of project activities both by students and teachers (Santos, 2020; Gamage et al., 2021; Salcedo-López et al., 2021). In particular, possibilities for rallying community, importance of communication and collaboration relations, opportunity to widen one’s horizon, improve oneself, acquire practical knowledge and skills are emphasised (Vasiliauskienė et al., 2008). When seeking professional and personal success, a human being should develop both their knowledge, functional skills and abilities, and social competences that are inseparable from personal values and beliefs (Zubrickienė et al., 2016). Besides improved competences linked to professional profiles, international mobility of vocational professionals has great impact on their intercultural competences and foreign language skills, greater cultural diversity awareness (Santos, 2020; Salcedo-López et al., 2021). Participation in international mobility activities could also have great impact of teachers’ professional development and career (Salcedo-López et al., 2021). Seeking to assess the benefits of project activities for the teacher’s personality, the informants were asked what, in their opinion, were the benefits of participation in projects for the vocational teachers as individuals.

When analysing the informant responses, the following qualitative subcategories of the category **benefits of project activities for vocational teacher as an individual** were discerned: *growth of self-confidence, courage, responsibility, personality enrichment and transformation of values; international cultural experience; organisational experience, and possibilities for self-expression*. Moreover, the research revealed that the informants assessed the benefits of the project activities viewing them through the prism of international projects.

It is noteworthy that the responses of research participants as a personal benefit identified *stronger self-confidence* that should be linked with greater courage, responsibility, enrichment of personality and transformation of values. In the opinion of vocational teachers, “new responsibility” [T6;2] appeared when participating in projects that enabled the vocational teacher to act in a determined and

courageous manner, and to make the decisions independently in new undefined situations, especially when travelling to another country with their students. For example, as the vocational teacher [T3;2] said, *“after travelling to another country, initially, you feel kind of timid, but you cannot show this to your students, you have to be decisive <...>, you are forced to act; thus, courage is developed and confidence in your abilities”*. This attitude was supported by other research participants [T2, T4, T8], emphasising that before going to another country with students, a screening of project participants is performed. If the vocational teacher passes the screening, *“this gives them self-confidence”* [T8;2] and serves as recognition of their competence. Moreover, vocational teachers identified the changed attitude to common human values, enrichment of their personality, and gaining of skills as personal benefits of participation in activities under international projects [T8;3].

It is noteworthy that vocational teachers mentioned the *intercultural experience gained* as an important personal benefit of project activities. This subcategory is substantiated by thoughts of informants [T7, T4, T3, T8, T9] that prove the importance of gaining international cultural experience for the vocational teachers' personality. For example, informant [T9;3] noted that *“culture and cultural cognition were the most important to him/her as a human being”*.

Vocational teachers who took part in the study linked the personal benefits of participation in the project activities with *new organisational experience and opportunities for self-expression*. This subcategory was illustrated by statements of informants [T1, T3, T5 and T7] suggesting that they associated personal benefits with professional activities, emphasising the organisational experience and the emergence of opportunity *“to express oneself through communication in another language”* [T1;3], which was important for them as a teacher as well as an individual. Colleagues were supported by vocational teacher [T8;4], who associated self-expression in project activities both with personal desires and their fulfilment, and with the realisation of professional ideas.

When speaking of personal benefits of project activities, the informants also noted a stronger job satisfaction and increased motivation for work, whereas career was mentioned as the benefit of regular participation in projects (*“I see active involvement in projects as a kind of career, both personal and working. This elevates a person to a higher level”* [T9;6]).

In summary of the research participants' responses, it could be suggested that the personal benefits of participation in projects for vocational teachers involve stronger self-confidence and courage, development of responsibility, enhanced determination to act and make decisions, and new attitude to common human values. Personal benefit of participating in projects is also linked with opportunities for self-expression, improvement of foreign language speaking skills, new intercultural and organisational experience, and career.

***Benefits of project activities for vocational teacher's practical activities.*** In scientific literature, project activities are defined as educational, cognitive, creative, or scientific activities of the project partners with the view to achieving a common goal and result. According to findings by Günbayi et al. (2016), teachers gain benefits of participating in Erasmus+ projects are “technology usage in lessons and improved of technology use skills as well as broadening horizons”. Initiative and creativity developed through mobility projects enabled vocational teachers to renew teaching material, to adopt new teaching methods, to share good practice and knowledges, implementing new teaching approaches into teaching programs (Egetenmeyer et al., 2011; Starczewska, 2017). Both vocational teachers and learners acting in teaching and learning environment within international mobility activities “can develop and enrich their “international” knowledge, skills, and attributes” as well as they “enriches vocational knowledges by establishing transnational connections and skills” (Tran, 2013, 504;503) and further able to create / stimulate international and national networks (Santos, 2020).

Seeing that project activities are examined in the context of working activities, it is expedient to analyse the benefits of project activities for the practical activities of vocational teachers. Thus, vocational teachers who took part in the research were asked about their opinion on the benefits of participation in projects for practical activities of vocational teachers.

When reviewing the informants' responses, three subcategories of the qualitative category ***benefits of project activities for vocational teacher's practical activities*** were distinguished: *improvement of*

*professional, foreign language competences, qualification improvement; introduction of innovations and quality of lectures; cooperation with foreign colleagues and common direction in vocational training.*

It is noteworthy that all vocational teachers who took part in the study unanimously agreed that participation in projects was beneficial in all respects to students, teaching, and training institution equally. One of the most significant aspects discerned in the informants' responses included *improvement of professional and foreign language competences, and improvement of qualification*. This qualitative subcategory is supported by the statements of informants [T1, T4, T5, T7, T9] to the effect that vocational teachers improve their competences and professional qualification while participating in project activities and, in turn, *"teachers utilise the practical experience in professional activities"* [T1;2]. *"General foreign language and speciality foreign language improvement"* [T7;2], according to vocational teachers who took part in the study, represent a particularly important aspect of project activities. When speaking of foreign language skills' improvement, informant [T4;4] stressed its benefit for both building the cooperation relations, preparing for lectures, collecting information, and analysing literature in the foreign language. A vocational teacher who took part in the study emphasised the benefits of speciality foreign language development: *"when I go to speciality projects, I always check and analyse the specific lexicon of my speciality <...>"*.

The subcategory of *introduction of innovations and quality of lectures* discerned in the course of the study proves that introduction of new technologies in the vocational training process and use of new ways and methods of teaching that are applied in practical activities of vocational teachers as a result of project activities are linked by the vocational teachers directly with better quality of lectures [T3–T5, T7, T9]. Informant [T5;1] tied the introduction of innovations with vocational training diversity and changed or updated teaching-learning setting that is directly associated with the *"better quality of both theoretical and practical lectures"*. According to the vocational teachers, *"during each project, I learn something new and then teach my students to apply the new techniques"* [T7;2]. Moreover, the experience of project participation and benefits of project activities were associated by the informants with the practical application of innovations' introduction: *"we apply the experience gained in vocational training by introducing innovations, testing new methods and technologies of teaching"* [T1;2]. Vocational teachers shared their experiences gained when implementing the projects both with students and other teachers [T6;4].

Another subcategory identified while analysing the informant responses refers to the *collaboration with foreign colleagues and common direction of vocational training*. The study participants listed their relations with colleagues from vocational training institutions of other countries, knowledge of the vocational training system of other countries and curricula as benefits of participation in project activities. According to vocational teachers [T2 and T9], *"participation in projects provides the opportunity to build the relations with colleagues"* [T2;1], and, in their opinion, it was very important that *"the relationships built continued after the project"* [T9;8]. In the course of conversations with the vocational teachers it emerged that cooperation of vocational teachers with foreign vocational training institutions helped set *"a common direction in vocational training"* and strive for *"higher level of vocational training"* [T6;3]. International experience gained in the project activities and common direction of vocational training, according to informant [T4;5], was significant when seeking for international integration.

Analysis of the informants' responses also disclosed that some of the vocational teachers, for example informant [T6;4], specified the changed relations with students, transformation of their attitude to the teacher as the benefits of involvement in projects for the practical activities of vocational teachers. According to the informant, *"in project activities <...> we become substantially closer to students, get to know them better; students start trusting their teacher more, and their attitude to the teacher changes"* [T6;4].

In summary, it can be suggested that benefits of projects for practical activities of vocational teachers can be linked with the possibility to develop competences and improve qualification, introduction of new technologies in the education process, application of new innovative methods of teaching in the teaching process, contacts and relations with colleagues from Europe and other foreign countries, dissemination of experience, most recent professional knowledge, and strengthened foreign language

skills. Diversity of vocational training, international experience, intercultural competence, and international integration, all of them helping shape a common consistent direction of vocational training and striving for a higher level of training, are also unquestionable benefits for the practical activities of vocational teachers. All these aspects cannot be separated from heartfelt interaction, collaboration and relations with the students, facilitated, according to the vocational teachers, by participation in projects and engaging in joint activities when striving for the project results.

## Conclusions

Aided by the funding from the EU funds, vocational schools most often take part in international projects (Erasmus+, NordPlus, Interreg Europe) and implement international mobility, strategic partnership and cross-border cooperation programmes involving students, student assistance specialists, school principals, and general education and vocational teachers. Projects implemented in Lithuania, in vocational training institutions that possess the greatest experience of international project activities, pertain to qualification improvement of vocational teachers, introduction of innovations, and renovation and expansion of infrastructure.

Diverse benefits of participation in project activities are enjoyed by all participants of international projects. Benefits experienced by vocational teachers from project activities are oriented to experiential learning, when learning occurs through personal experience. Experiences gained by the participants in the projects while introducing new ideas or technologies, refurbishing the learning/teaching environment, and integrating innovative teaching methods in the curriculum elevate the professional qualification of vocational teachers and simultaneously promote the expansion of their own learning opportunities by getting involved in creation and implementation of new projects.

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