

Championing Green Mobility through the Erasmus+ Programme

*Contributions of the Erasmus Student Network to the
Implementation Guidelines - Erasmus+ and European
Solidarity Corps green transition and sustainable
development strategy*



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1. Introduction

Since 2019, the European Union has been actively and continuously trying to become more environmentally sustainable, marked by the introduction of the Green Deal, through which they pledged to make Europe the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050. Achieving these ambitious goals for the EU requires that the associated programmes also align with these objectives, fostering cohesion among the various policies promoted by the European Union.

In this context, the European Commission launched the [Council Recommendation for the Green Transition and Sustainable Development in 2022](#). These recommendations ensure that programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps actively contribute to the transition towards climate neutrality by 2050. These goals were emphasised under the six objectives for the **European Higher Education Area**¹ and have been integrated into one of the **four horizontal priorities of the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027: Environment and the fight against climate change**.

The Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps “can function as role models and have a multiplier effect at European, national, and local levels.” (European Commission, 2024). The intention is to involve wider society in achieving the goals proposed by the European Green Deal, and nothing ensures success more effectively than engaging key actors such as students, teachers, and administrators. **By involving participants of the Erasmus+ programme and leveraging its multiplier effect**, the initiative also ensures that learners acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to live more sustainably and support the transformation of our society.

Considering the goal of involving the wider society, especially students, at the beginning of this Erasmus+ programme cycle, the Erasmus Student Network coordinated a project in the field of green mobility. The [Green Erasmus project](#) “strived to improve the environmental sustainability of the Erasmus+ programme and raise awareness across the European Higher Education sector about the importance of sustainable internationalisation.” (Green Erasmus Project, n.d.). The project officially concluded in 2023, but as with all projects funded by the

1 The six objectives of the European Higher Education are: quality, inclusion and equality between men and women, ecological and digital transitions, support for teachers and trainers, higher education and, finally, a strong geopolitical dimension.

Erasmus+ programme, the goal is for its outcomes to continue bearing fruit, supported by a sustainability roadmap even after the official period ends.

In light of this, **we have continuously integrated the recommendations from this project and remain committed to advocating for change.** We aim to ensure that this priority is developed further, always taking the student perspective into account.

In another significant step, in November 2024, the European Commission launched the [“Implementation Guidelines - Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Green Transition and Sustainable Development Strategy”](#), a document providing all actors involved with a comprehensive strategy to address the environment and the fight against climate change priority. It is worth noting that a similar document has already been published for other horizontal priorities, with its pioneer and success being the launch of the implementation guidelines for the [Inclusion and Diversity priority](#).

The Erasmus Student Network welcomes the publication of these guidelines, which will ensure that all actors involved in these two key programmes are aligned and working towards shared goals.

This document seeks to reflect on the **publication of newly published guidelines and assess what has changed in navigating this priority since the conclusion of the Green Erasmus Project.** Two years after the project’s end, and in light of the publication of this strategic document, it is important to evaluate what has been implemented, identify new challenges that have emerged, and outline opportunities for continued progress.

2. Two years after the end of the Green Erasmus Project: What has changed?

The Green Erasmus Project was created with a dual focus: **recognising the importance of mobility and the Erasmus+ programme while also considering its environmental impact**. The Erasmus+ programme is the European Union's flagship initiative, **enabling approximately 1.2 million people to participate in mobility activities annually** (European Commission, 2023). However, the programme's notable success has also contributed negatively to environmental sustainability. In 2017, it was reported that **421,433 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents (tCO₂-eq) were released into the atmosphere as a result of the programme** (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2021).

In light of the priorities established under the European Green Deal and to maintain alignment with the goals of the Erasmus+ programme, the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) partnered with other organisations to develop the Green Erasmus Project². **This initiative aimed to continue fostering the primary objectives of the Erasmus+ programme while addressing its impact on the environment**. The project sought to explore how the programme could contribute to societal development and promote sustainable living, ensuring it could operate without continuously jeopardising the environment.

The project, which ran from 2021 to 2023, had the following key objectives:

- To reduce the negative environmental impact of the Erasmus+ programme.
- To raise awareness across the European higher education sector about the importance of sustainable internationalisation.
- To empower student organisations as agents of change, advocating for improvements in environmental sustainability.

As already mentioned above, although the project officially concluded in 2023, its findings and recommendations remain highly relevant to the higher education sector and the implementation of mobility programmes. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on the main

² The Green Erasmus Project was coordinated by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), European University Foundation (EUF), European Students' Union (ESU), Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Technische Hochschule Köln (TH Köln), and Students Organising for Sustainability UK (SOS UK).

conclusions of the project and evaluate which recommendations have been implemented since its conclusion in 2023.

2.1. Green Erasmus Survey: Identified Challenges

Through the development of the Green Erasmus Project, [several key documents were published](#). Among these, it is essential to reflect on the **Research Report on the Habits of Erasmus Students** and the accompanying **Policy Recommendations**. Specifically, the Research Report was designed to analyse the findings of the Green Erasmus Survey, which collected responses in 2021.

The Green Erasmus Survey provided a deeper understanding of the ecological footprint of students' mobility (Diekmann, A., & Karaiskos, G., 2022) by:

- Mapping students' behaviours and consumption patterns at home and during mobility;
- Exploring the reasons behind students' behaviours;
- Examining the influence of sociopsychological factors, such as beliefs, attitudes, and norms, on students' consumption and behaviour.

The report highlighted several key findings **related to travel patterns, students' behaviours, the actions they take, and the knowledge they gain while abroad**. The first significant finding concerns **travel patterns**. Although the travel associated with student mobility substantially contributes to the carbon footprint of higher education, it is notable that **air travel remains the preferred mode of transportation among students**. The Green Erasmus Survey reveals that 73.1% of students reported travelling to their destination by plane, and 69.8% used the same method for their return.

This trend was later confirmed by the XV ESNsurvey (Figure 1)³, where 71.04% of participants reported travelling to their destination by plane, and 70.5% used the same mode of transport to return. The reasons pointed out by the students both on the Green Erasmus Survey and the XV ESNsurvey were the cost of the travel and travel time (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024).

³ The XV ESNsurvey data was collected in 2023, two years after the Green Erasmus Survey data collection.

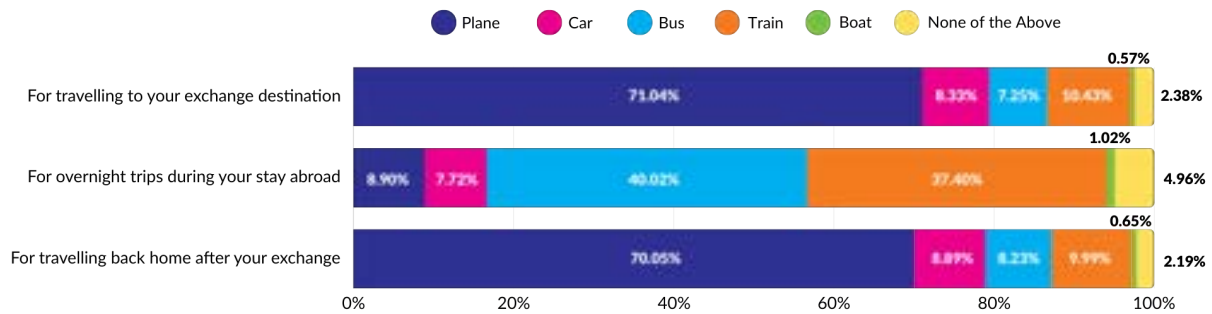


Figure 1: Retracted from the XV ESNsurvey "Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All" - Means of transport used for travelling at the three key moments of your exchange, percentage (N = 14.489)

Building on the key findings above, it is also important to **highlight the gap between students' attitudes and their actual behaviours**. As noted in the report, “despite the high levels of concern about sustainability found and the students’ self-reported environmental awareness, barriers related to cost and distance prevent students from adopting sustainable behaviours” (Diekmann, A., & Karaiskos, G., 2022). This indicates that while students recognise the importance of environmental sustainability, they often do not travel using sustainable modes of transportation due to financial constraints and the length of time such journeys require.

The same pattern is evident when **examining students' knowledge about environmental topics and the actions they are willing to take**. **Nine out of ten** students who completed the Green Erasmus Survey reported being informed about environmental issues and concerned about climate change. However, **they remain hesitant to adopt certain behaviours**, such as actively organising community events, engaging with media focused on environmental issues, or participating in community clubs. Additionally, they are reluctant to abandon habits like frequent air travel and using low-cost airlines, as already noticed above (Diekmann, A., & Karaiskos, G., 2022).

This highlights a gap between awareness and action. One of the key goals of the **Implementation Guidelines - Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps green transition and sustainable development strategy**—“to equip participants with the knowledge and skills they

need to make sustainable choices and engage in sustainable practices during programme activities”—does not appear to be achieving the desired effect according to the survey results. Despite having the knowledge, there seems to be a lack of willingness to change behaviour.

When it comes to specific actions, the survey found that:

- Only **4.2%** of students had contacted the media about environmental issues.
- **5.1%** had tried to directly contact a politician.
- Only **11.1%** had participated in a local community initiative addressing environmental issues.
- **55.5%** had engaged with media working on environmental issues.
- **56.1%** had signed an online petition related to environmental concerns.
- **2.9%** had joined a club or group focused on environmental issues

These last two actions were the most popular, reflecting a certain level of commitment and activism. While these numbers indicate growing awareness and some willingness to act, they also underline the need for more effective strategies to translate environmental concerns into consistent, impactful actions.

Regarding more specific actions, **70.9% of respondents “strongly agree” with actively promoting environmental sustainability within their higher education institutions.** They expressed particular interest in seeing initiatives such as food waste composting on campus (57.4%), the installation of donation points for food and clothes (56.5%), more sustainable food options in campus canteens (54.1%), and a complete ban on plastic products (54.3%) (Diekmann, A., & Karaiskos, G., 2022). These findings, as reported by the Green Erasmus Survey, reflect a clear demand for practical measures to enhance sustainability on campuses, highlighting areas where institutions can take concrete steps to align with students’ expectations.

2.2. Green Erasmus Policy Recommendations: What was implemented, and what still needs to be changed?

The Green Erasmus project, based on all the research and the contributions made, set out its [Policy Recommendations](#) aimed at achieving the sustainability goals of the European Union through sustainable internationalisation. It became evident for the project that **HEIs' role in reaching students and fostering knowledge is a powerful one.**

The recommendations were divided into two action areas: **Improving conditions** for both students and staff to travel sustainably to and from their mobility destination and increasing the **potential to acquire green skills and competencies** during a sustainable mobility lifecycle, as well as its recognition.

The initial recommendation was **to revamp the Green Top-up**, as research conducted by the Green Erasmus Project revealed that the amount is insufficient for students to cover the additional costs of sustainable travel. **We are happy to see that this recommendation was fully addressed by the European Commission in 2024, with updates to the [Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024](#) and the implementation of enhanced travel support measures.** Although it will take time to observe the full impact of these new measures, this is a significant step forward.

On the topic of sustainable travel, another key recommendation is to **promote more sustainable business travel within the Erasmus+ programme**. It is crucial to embed sustainable travel practices across all aspects of the programme, particularly in business travel. This includes consolidating events and meetings to maximise time, minimise the CO2 footprint associated with travel, and reduce reliance on unsustainable transport methods. Encouragingly, **we have seen improvements in the strategies adopted by Higher Education Institutions**, with many opting for sustainable travel methods for conferences and other events. However, there is still room for improvement. The [Interrail Pass for Erasmus+](#), available also for adults, offers a promising opportunity to support participation in activities funded by the Erasmus+ programme while encouraging sustainable travel.

Additionally, we have observed an **increased use of digital methods and greater proficiency in utilising these tools**. This shift has significantly reduced the need for travel, enabling more to be accomplished in online settings. While these developments are promising, **there is still considerable work to be done in the field of digitalisation**. It is essential to enhance flexibility in digital approaches and to explore strategies for maintaining audience engagement in an online setting.

Regarding sustainability skills, **the recommendation is to enhance environmental sustainability skills and competencies as a key goal of the EU Higher Education sector**. The [GreenComp competence framework](#) marked a significant step toward ensuring that learning about environmental sustainability becomes a systemic feature of policy and practice in the

European Higher Education Area. To achieve this, the entire educational system must adapt and reinforce this framework.

However, significant steps are still needed to determine how best to convey this knowledge to students. While there are ongoing debates about incorporating it into the curriculum, we believe that **increasing student engagement in non-formal and informal education settings** could be particularly effective.

The **European University Alliances initiative**, especially those alliances focusing on sustainability, could play a pivotal role in addressing this challenge (EU GREEN, EURECA-PRO, UNIgreen, etc.). These alliances have the potential to integrate sustainability not only into formal education but also into non-formal and informal learning environments, thereby broadening the impact and fostering greater engagement among students.

The next recommendation focuses on updating the **ECHE Monitoring Guide** to include a professional competence framework for international relations officers, which incorporates training on environmental sustainability. The **Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)** should serve as a catalyst for a more thorough and consistent impact on the implementation of Erasmus+ and the standard practices of institutions. Moreover, incorporating specific requirements into ECHE monitoring could help coordinate efforts towards achieving environmental sustainability.

While this has not been included directly in the ECHE, progress has been made under the **Green Transition and Sustainable Development Strategy**, supported by resources published by **Green SALTO** and the reinforcement of **Training and Cooperation Activities (TCAs)** and **Long-Term Activities (LTAs)**. That said, there is still room for improvement in this area. We are hopeful that these practices will continue to be strengthened and, in the long-term, included in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education monitoring guide.

As highlighted above, even though students possess the knowledge, there is still a lack of action to drive meaningful change. In light of this, **higher education institutions (HEIs) should be encouraged to include sustainability-related activities as part of student mobility preparation**. HEIs significantly shape the mobility experience and should actively prepare and support students for a sustainable mobility period.

Additionally, **HEIs should promote the recognition of learning experiences gained through a sustainable mobility lifecycle.** Implementing this could increase students' interest and motivation to act sustainably throughout their mobility, particularly if such efforts are recognised in their diploma supplements. Acknowledging students who commit to sustainability in this formal way could serve as a powerful incentive.

The final recommendation focuses on making international student mobility more deeply connected with environmental sustainability by **fostering collaboration between HEIs, student organisations, and NGOs working in this area.** For instance, encouraging students to volunteer with NGOs dedicated to environmental sustainability could create stronger connections between mobility students and local communities, provide valuable learning opportunities, and inspire continued engagement even after the mobility period concludes.

Although both these recommendations are lightly addressed in the Green Transition and Sustainable Development Strategy, there remains significant room for improvement. **A more comprehensive implementation of these ideas in the coming years of the Erasmus+ programme could ensure that the progress made translates into meaningful actions by students.**



3. Looking Ahead to the Future of Environmental Sustainability in Learning Mobility

While reflecting on the progress introduced by the European Commission under the Environment and Fight Against Climate Change horizontal priority and the Green Transition and Sustainable Development Strategy, as well as analysing the findings and recommendations of the Green Erasmus Project, it is clear that significant advancements have been made. However, considerable potential remains for further progress. Addressing these gaps will be crucial both in the remaining years of the current programme cycle and in shaping the implementation of the upcoming Erasmus+ programme 2027–2034.

Further recommendations for the improvement of the Environment and Fight Against Climate Change priority in learning mobility:

- **Higher Education Institutions should enhance their promotion of travel support measures, ensuring that students receive all the necessary pre-departure information they need before moving on.** Enhanced promotion of this information could play a crucial role in encouraging future mobility participants to choose more sustainable travel options, especially now that funding has increased. Additionally, the dissemination of mobility-related information should be standardised and, where possible, provided in a digital format to improve accessibility and reach. As a further measure, providing students with green guides and handbooks containing useful information about the campus and the city could support the implementation of these initiatives, equipping students to make more informed and sustainable choices during their mobility experience.
- **National Agencies and Higher Education Institutions should further promote the use of the Interrail Pass for Erasmus+⁴, ensuring that travel costs from the mobility are reimbursed.** This would allow students to travel to their mobility destination while fully benefiting from the advantages of an Interrail Pass and get the costs reimbursed.

⁴ ESN has also collaborated with Eurail to launch a tailored railway pass for Erasmus+ Students- [the Interrail Pass for Erasmus+](#). They can purchase the Interrail Pass for Erasmus+ and choose between validations of 4 days in 6 months or 6 days in 6 months.

- **The European Commission, National Agencies, and Higher Education Institutions need to improve their digital infrastructure.** With the implementation of travel support measures, it is essential to focus on the Twin Transition, ensuring that these measures can fully benefit from enhanced digital tools. These new tools can facilitate the effective implementation of green mobility and streamline processes, such as calculating distances between mobility destinations.
- **National Agencies and Higher Education Institutions need to enhance digital methods to improve the preparation of mobility experiences and reduce the need for business travel.** For instance, preparatory visits can be conducted digitally before physical mobility takes place. This could include pre-mobility online courses, virtual meetings, and the use of digital cooperation tools. Furthermore, since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable increase in the development and adoption of online tools for facilitating meetings and conferences. These tools should continue to be further explored and optimised to support sustainable practices in the mobility and education sectors. By adopting these approaches, projects can significantly reduce their overall carbon footprint while maintaining efficiency and collaboration.
- **National Agencies are encouraged to develop their own strategies for the green transition and environmental sustainability within the Erasmus+ programme, as recommended by the European Commission.** During the Green Erasmus Project, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were asked whether their institution had a sustainability strategy in place. While more than half of the participants responded positively, only **27.87%** confirmed that the strategy had been successfully implemented, and a majority of **60.66%** indicated that they did not know. **This highlights the need to reinforce the implementation of sustainability strategies and ensure they are publicly accessible.** Making these strategies public can provide accurate information, foster transparency, and facilitate the sharing of best practices among National Agencies and institutions, further promoting environmental sustainability across the Erasmus+ programme.
- **National authorities must prioritise investment in national railway infrastructure in order to fully achieve the objectives of sustainable travel, as set by the travel support measures implemented in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024.** To make green travel measures fully successful, it is urgent for governments to enhance railway connections,

ensuring that train travel becomes a viable alternative for everyone who wishes to go abroad. Furthermore, in collaboration with the European Union, national authorities should seek better coordination among countries to facilitate seamless cross-border train travel. These steps are crucial for encouraging sustainable travel behaviours among students and the wider public, aligning with the Green Deal objectives and ensuring that sustainable mobility becomes a truly attractive option (XV ESNsurvey, 2024).

- **National Agencies should fully implement the Green Contact Point to ensure the effective realisation of the set goals.** However, it is important to acknowledge, as highlighted in the XV ESNsurvey recommendations, that the creation of new roles within National Agencies often adds responsibilities to already existing staff. This approach limits their ability to fully explore and effectively implement the horizontal priorities. **To address this challenge, it is crucial to increase human resources within National Agencies,** enabling staff to dedicate the necessary time and focus to achieving these priorities.
- **The European Commission, National Agencies and Higher Education Institutions should further explore the potential of former Erasmus+ participants to be the Ambassadors of the Erasmus Generation,** leveraging their personal experiences to promote the programme's benefits and impact. By formally engaging these alumni, institutions can create a powerful network of advocates who can reach prospective students, educators and policymakers, demonstrating the tangible advantages of international learning mobility and, in this case, increasing the multiplier effect of the green skills learned aboard (XV ESNsurvey, 2024).
- **European University Alliances should strive to fully realise their potential, particularly those actively promoting this priority (e.g., EU GREEN, EURECA-PRO, UNIGreen).** These alliances have a unique opportunity to integrate sustainability not only into formal education but also into non-formal and informal learning environments. By doing so, they can significantly broaden their impact and foster deeper engagement among local and international students, encouraging them to adopt sustainable practices in various contexts.

- **Higher Education Institutions should enhance the promotion and expand the offering of their active engagement initiatives and actions aimed at students, particularly in sustainability-related areas.** The **Green Erasmus Survey** revealed that students are particularly interested in seeing HEIs increase their efforts in initiatives such as food waste composting on campus, the installation of donation points for food and clothes, providing more sustainable food options in campus canteens, and implementing a complete ban on plastic products.



Conclusions: What Now?

The Erasmus Student Network has consistently worked to create, promote, and foster environmental sustainability within the Erasmus+ programme. However, there remains significant room for improvement across all stakeholders involved in the programme. While **ESN's work on this topic is far from complete, we will continue advocating for systematic changes in the European Higher Education Area and explore a potential Erasmus+ KA2 project application following the Green Erasmus Project.**

With the Green Erasmus Project, ESN identified numerous opportunities for improvement and shortcomings within the Erasmus+ programme in facilitating environmentally sustainable actions during students' mobility periods. ESN is committed to addressing these findings in future projects and integrating them into all aspects of its work.

As ESN continues to look ahead at the future of the Erasmus+ programme, it is vital to promote policies that support sustainable travel and embed environmental sustainability into the mobility experience. Through ongoing efforts in communication, education, and collaboration with other stakeholders, **the Erasmus+ programme has the potential to become a leading example of sustainable internationalisation**, aligning with the goals of the European Green Deal. To maintain the momentum of this work, it is essential to continue advocating for change and ensuring that sustainability becomes a core element of Erasmus+ and other mobility programmes across Europe.

As Erasmus of Rotterdam once said, **"The main hope of a nation lies in the proper education of its youth"** It is, therefore, the responsibility of the Erasmus Generation to champion sustainability and safeguard the environment for future generations.



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