

April 2021

## Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021 -2027: An Evaluation of the program's sustainability strategy by Erasmus by Train e.V.

The new programmatic guidelines for the Erasmus+ program, released on March 25th, 2021, will be effective until the end of 2027. Upon its publication, newspapers, politicians and public bodies alike were pointing towards two major achievements of the renewed program: the topped-up funding (from 11 billion in the last tenure (14-20) to 26,2 billion until 2027) and its focus on sustainability.

These guidelines will most significantly shape the programme's mid-term future in the next seven years, thereby forming the working ground of Erasmus by Train e.V. By pursuing our overarching goal of linking the Erasmus+ program with Interrail to provide all outgoing students with free and sustainable opportunities of transportation, the steps undertaken by the European Commission (EU) to introduce the aspect of sustainability into the Erasmus+ scheme are welcomed. However, when raised, strategies taken towards increasing the sustainability of the program remain vague in their formulation, strenuous in their implementation and preliminary in their achievements. In particular, we evaluate the following aspects of the new Erasmus+ guidelines relevant for consideration:

- **Recognition of Unsustainability as an Issue:** We are delighted to see that the Erasmus+ program recognizes the issue of unsustainable travel –a factor significantly contributing to the program's environmental footprint. We support the uptake of sustainability as a horizontal priority throughout the whole program and the defining and anchoring of the term green travel within the Erasmus program.
- **Compensation:** We appreciate the fact the Erasmus+ program is willing to fund green travel, acknowledging the high amount of individual costs of traveling sustainably. However, we think that this approach to issue of unsustainable travel within the student mobility of Erasmus falls short in three dimensions:
  - o **Amount:** The proposed compensation of 50 Euros and up to additional 4 days of individual support to cover travel days, will not be enough to cover the full price difference between a cheap flight and more sustainable ways of traveling. Especially considering the discount on flight tickets for Erasmus students in place due to the long-lasting partnership between the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) and Ryanair. In contrast, a free Interrail ticket for all Erasmus students would be a greater economic incentive to travel sustainably. At the same time, the financial efforts for such a top-up Interrail ticket provision would sway in a realistic frame.
  - o **Bureaucracy:** The proposed solution allows students to “opt” (application steps remain unspecified) for compensation, if they have used a transport mode covered by green travel as defined by the program. This covers the use of trains, buses and car-pooling. We highly appreciate the flexibility given to students regarding the choice of the mode of transport, but we fear that this will lead to a bureaucratic burden for both, applicants and implementing bodies, which could lower the motivation to make use of this option. It remains exciting to see how

students will have to prove that they have travelled by car together. At the same time, the hand out of a free Interrail ticket with the signed learning agreement would certainly be a smaller bureaucratic task.

- o **Incentive:** Rather than a compensation of the underdone efforts for green travel, we advocate an incentive going beyond the individual, having factual capabilities to convince a larger group of people and not only single persons with intrinsic motivation for green travel. In the annual work program 2021 of the Erasmus+ program it says that *“European Year of Rail 2021 is an excellent platform to promote the efforts to green Erasmus+ and encourage participants to choose rail or other low carbon means of transport.”* We doubt that the introduction of a small compensation of extra costs of sustainable travel is able to fulfil this goal. In contrast, a free Interrail ticket for every Erasmus participant could convince many students to dare the adventure of international train travel.
- **Increased Sensibility for Discrimination and unequal Accessibility:** We applaud the program’s heightened sensibility and increased focus on different forms of discrimination that can hinder students from becoming participants of the program.
  - o **Geographical Barriers:** We appreciate that the scheme recognized geographical barriers as a form of discrimination, thereby raising awareness to inequalities in academic mobility and increasing efforts in connecting more localities to the program’s reach. Simultaneously, we are worried that the acknowledgement of geographical barriers as constituting obstacles to mobility may be used as an argument against the introduction of large-scale support and requirements for sustainable travel. Rather than seeing the connectivity of more inaccessible places as a reason to continue to rely on conventional modes of transport, we advocate for it to be framed as a central reason for a fast and extensive sustainable transformation of the inner-European transportation sector.

EU’s Green Erasmus branding (envisioning carbon-neutrality and a stronger role of rail travel) and the granting of individual green mobility pivot in different directions. The language used to design the content of Erasmus+ goals of sustainable mobility is ambitious and widely framed to further the learning of the individual in sustainability related issues. The goal of sustainability does not tackle the design of the Erasmus program itself but aims at embedding issues of (un)sustainability in all contents offered by the program itself. In our view, this a) does not impose a notable green impact to the Erasmus program and b) places responsibility on the individual to act upon the newly learnt.

When aiming for an environmentally sustainable and economically just Erasmus action scheme, the prevailing imbalance of market environments between EU-wide aviation and alternative modes of sustainable transport is hampering most of the efforts. Erasmus by Train e.V. is calling on the EU to not limit its action to rewarding individual Erasmus students, opting for a more complex journey in terms of organization, but rather to work toward the provisioning of infrastructural and cultural incentives that allow sustainable academic travel forms to shape the future of Erasmus+ and mobility within Europe.

