

Erasmus by Train
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Free Interrail passes for all Erasmus+ students

Problem description

As part of the European Union's Erasmus+ program, 335,600 students traveled to other countries in 2018/19 alone,¹ where they gained valuable experience. The travel costs for their journeys are effectively borne by the "Higher Education Mobility" participants in the Erasmus+ program themselves. Over 75 percent of Erasmus+ students took a plane for both their outward and return journeys.² This practice is reinforced by the fact that the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), which is the largest student organization in Europe according to its own statement, cooperates with various airlines. Since 2017, ESN has had a close partnership with the airline Ryanair that allows Erasmus+ students to receive a 10 percent discount on the ticket price of four flights and a free 20-kilogram piece of luggage.³ In 2019/20 alone, over 400,000 flights were booked under the discount program.⁴ As recently as spring 2021, ESN Italy announced a collaboration with Qatar Airways.⁵ As students, many of whom have completed or will complete an Erasmus+ stay, this status quo concerns us for four reasons:

1. **Sustainability:** Since flying is the most emissions-intensive way to travel, the Erasmus+ program significantly contributes to the European Union's already substantial CO2 emissions.

¹ Erasmus+ Annual Report 2019, Luxembourg 2020, p. 37,

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/30af2b54-3f4d-11eb-b27b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

² Students' Mobility Needs. Snapshots of a Eurail survey on participants in Erasmus+ Mobility Programmes, Brüssel 2020, p. 4,

https://esn.org/sites/default/files/news/erasmus_mobility_survey_report_-_final_0.pdf.

³ Ryanair & ESN Celebrate Launch Of Fourth Year Partnership - Italy & Spain The Most Popular Erasmus Destinations, September 15, 2020,

<https://corporate.ryanair.com/news/ryanair-esn-celebrate-launch-of-fourth-year-partnership-italy-spain-the-most-popular-erasmus-destinations/>.

⁴ Erasmus Student Network Annual Report 2019/2020, Brussel 2020, p. 50,

https://issuu.com/esnint/docs/annual_report_2019-2020.

⁵ Qatar Airways at the Webseite of ESN Italy, <https://esn.it/en/node/957>.

2. **Equity:** If sustainable travel costs more than other ways of traveling, socioeconomically disadvantaged students in particular will not be able to afford sustainable Erasmus+ exchanges. This is contrary to the Erasmus+ program goals of inclusion and equal opportunity.
3. **Credibility of European institutions:** In November 2019, the European Parliament declared a climate emergency,⁶ and shortly afterwards, the European Commission presented its multi-billion European Green Deal.⁷ Similarly, the European Year of Rail 2021 points toward a sustainable transformation of the transport sector.⁸ But when it comes to considering how European programs impact the climate – and making those programs sustainable – the European Union remains reluctant. Tellingly, the European University Foundation, a network of top European universities, noted as recently as late 2019 that Erasmus+ had been slow to include green action in its own functioning.⁹ As a result, the European idea embodied by the Erasmus+ program and climate protection become opposites. This reduces the popularity of the Erasmus+ program and the credibility of the European Union in terms of its sustainability efforts.
4. **European integration:** The Erasmus+ program has been connecting Europe and its citizens for decades, strengthening European cohesion. However, a flight from metropolis to metropolis creates few opportunities for cross-cultural connection. Travel, which can convey the diverse scenic and cultural facets of Europe to students, is currently not being used to its full potential.

Resolution of the European Parliament

The European Parliament resolution of 15 September, 2020 on effective measures to 'green' Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps¹⁰ urges the European Commission to encourage and enable Erasmus+ students to choose the least-polluting means of transport, such as the train. In addition, the current financial rules should be revised so that the additional costs and journey times associated with the use of more environmentally friendly means of transport are reimbursed in full and additional journey times accounted for in grant allocations. Furthermore, the European Year of Rail 2021 should be used to enter into partnerships with European rail operators so that participants are eligible for discounted fares. Finally, the European Parliament underlines that effective measures to green the Erasmus+ program will not be possible without investing money.

⁶ Press Release of the European Parliament from November 29, 2019,

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191121IPR67110/the-european-parliament-declares-climate-emergency>.

⁷ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The European Green Deal at December 11, 2019 (COM/2019/640 final), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1588580774040&uri=CELEX%3A52019DC0640>.

⁸ See the European Parliament legislative resolution of 15 December, 2020 on the proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Rail (2021), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0345_EN.html.

⁹ Program announcement of the 9th Erasmus Salon organised by the European University Foundation, the European Students' Union and ESN on the topic of "Green Erasmus: from utopia to policy", <https://salons.uni-foundation.eu/salons/green-erasmus-utopia-policy/>.

¹⁰ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0211_EN.html.

New Erasmus+ Program Guide of the European Commission

Against this backdrop, the new Erasmus+ Programme Guide of the European Commission, which was published on March 25, 2021¹¹ and is valid for the years 2021 to 2027, is insufficient. It is true that the guide is a step in the right direction because it includes comprehensive sustainability strategies and that the high individual costs incurred by students who choose environmentally friendly means of transport are also considered. However, the new sustainability incentives are too small and their implementation too bureaucratic, which is why they are unlikely to spark a real change in student travel behavior. Specifically, the following three points fall short of the expectations of many students and International Offices:

1. **Amount of the contribution:** The single contribution as a top-up amount to the individual support that will be paid in the future when choosing sustainable means of transportation is insufficient. It currently stands at 50 EUR, along with up to four days of additional individual support, which does not fully compensate for the price difference between a cheap flight and more sustainable modes of travel. On the popular route between Berlin and Budapest, for example, one pays only 16 EUR (Ryanair) for round-trip plane tickets, while by train one pays at least 94 EUR¹² (Österreichische Bundesbahnen).
2. **Bureaucracy:** The commission's solution allows students to receive the compensation if low-emissions means of transport such as bus, train or car-pooling were used for the main part of the travel to and from the exchange destination. However, it is feared that this flexibility will lead to increased bureaucracy, both for the students and for the International Offices. This would significantly decrease students' motivation to apply for the grant. It also remains to be decided how students will have to prove that they traveled together by car.
3. **Incentive:** Instead of a retroactive contribution for green travel limited to those who decided to travel sustainably, we argue for an incentive that will convince a majority of students to travel sustainably ahead of time, when they are planning their stay abroad. We doubt that introducing a small contribution will be enough to achieve the goal of a sustainable Erasmus+ program. However, an incentive reaching every participant could have a positive impact on the general European transport transition.

¹¹ Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021 at March 25, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/default/files/2021-erasmusplus-programme-guide_v3_en.pdf.

¹² Lowest prices without special offers.

Our demand

We therefore call on the European Commission to live up to its own sustainability ambitions and create an effective incentive for Erasmus+ students to avoid traveling by plane in the future. Given the great success of the DiscoverEU initiative, which will be a part of the Erasmus+ program from 2022 onwards, **we propose combining Erasmus+ and Interrail to provide all Erasmus+ students with a free and sustainable train journey to and from their exchange destination.** This will create a real incentive for students while also reducing bureaucratic burdens. It could be possible, for example, for special Interrail passes to be handed out to students either directly by the International Offices or - similar to the current Ryanair partnership - via ESN as part of the ESNcard.

With 2021 being the European Year of Rail, now is the perfect time to make Erasmus+ more sustainable by providing free Interrail tickets for all students.

