

29 June 2022

A Joint Call for an Erasmus+ Ticket

A proposal for a ticket that greens the Erasmus+ programme while meeting the needs of its participants

Dear Commissioner Mariya Gabriel,

Dear Commissioner Adina Vălean,

In its action plan to boost long distance and cross-border passenger rail of 14 December 2021, the European Commission highlighted that “the approximately one million yearly Erasmus+ students [...] could use rail to travel to their exchange destination” and agreed to “consider amending Erasmus reimbursement rules to promote the use of sustainable modes of transport to Erasmus exchange locations”.¹ We very much welcome this commitment. With these statements, the European Commission proves that it recognises that the Erasmus+ programme needs to become more sustainable if it is to meet the challenges of the climate crisis. This change is not only expected by the Erasmus+ generation, but also required to meet the sustainability targets that European institutions themselves have set.

In a mobility programme such as Erasmus+, participant travel is responsible for a significant share of greenhouse gas emissions, meaning that mode of transport has a key role to play.² According to the recently published Green Erasmus report, roughly 70% of students travel by plane to and from their Erasmus+ destination.³ Strong incentives are needed to encourage Erasmus+ participants to switch from aviation to sustainable modes of transport such as bus and rail. A recent survey conducted by the Erasmus

¹ European Commission: Action plan to boost long distance and cross-border passenger rail, Communication to the European Parliament and the Council (COM(2021) 810 final), 14 December 2021, pp. 16-17, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=COM:2021:810:FIN&from=EN>.

² Finnish National Agency for Education: Feasibility Study on Compensation Scenarios for the New and Greener Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027, 2021 (= Reports and Surveys 2021:10), p. 5, https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/Feasibility_Study_Compensation_ErasmusPlus.pdf.

³ Green Erasmus Partnership: Green Erasmus Report, 2022, p. 21, <https://greenerasmus.org/documents/GE-report.pdf>.

Student Network and the Eurail Group found that Erasmus+ students with a relatively low income travelled less by train and more by bus than students with a relatively high income.⁴ This indicates that affordability is a key barrier to making sustainable travel choices. Under the status quo, sustainable travel is a luxury only possible for wealthy participants, which exacerbates socioeconomic disparities within the programme and therefore contradicts the “Inclusion and Diversity” priority of the Erasmus+ programme.⁵

Replying to Petition No 0681/2021, which called for free Interrail passes for all Erasmus+ students, the European Commission noted that 90% of young people who took part in the DiscoverEU initiative opted to travel by train more often, even after the conclusion of the programme.⁶ This demonstrates that the sustainable learning mobility opportunities offered by the Erasmus+ programme can have a tremendous impact by changing behaviour, building new habits and improving participants’ eco-literacy. It also offers an opportunity to engage students on sustainability topics and turn them into agents of change.

Inspired by the noteworthy successes of the DiscoverEU initiative⁷ as well as the great interest of both transport companies and universities in products that reduce the Erasmus+ programme's emissions⁸, we propose that the European Commission funds an Erasmus+ ticket for all Erasmus+ Higher Education Mobility participants. This ticket will allow programme participants to travel sustainably and free of charge to and from their exchange destination while discovering the diversity of the European continent along the way. This joint call makes concrete proposals on the design of such a ticket and its integration in the existing Erasmus+ programme. With the goal of building a strong proposal that takes the reality of the transport sector into account, we carried out extensive consultations with rail operators and umbrella organisations.

Higher Education Mobility participants were selected for two reasons. Firstly, Higher Education student and staff mobility is responsible for almost half of the total transport emissions of the Erasmus+ programme, as a recent study by the Finnish National Agency

⁴ ESN and Eurail: Students’ Mobility Needs: Snapshots of a Eurail survey on participants in Erasmus+ Mobility Programmes, 2020, p. 4, https://esn.org/sites/default/files/news/erasmus_mobility_survey_report_-_final_0.pdf.

⁵ European Commission: Priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a/priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme>.

⁶ Committee on Petitions: Notice to members on Petition No 0681/2021 by Jonathan Hassel (German), on behalf of ERASMUS by Train e.V., on free Interrail passes for all ERASMUS students (CM\1240451EN), 21 September 2021, p. 3, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PETI-CM-697820_EN.pdf.

⁷ Further information can be found on the European Youth Portal: https://europa.eu/youth/discovereu_en.

⁸ The interest is reflected in a new pilot initiative between the Coimbra Group, an association of European universities, and Eurail, the company behind the Interrail passes. This partnership allows students and staff of 28 Coimbra Group universities to purchase Interrail Global Passes at a significant discount. See Coimbra Group ASBL: Coimbra Group & Eurail together for a Greener Erasmus+, 21 July 2021, <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/coimbra-group-eurail-together-for-a-greener-erasmus/>.

for Education showed.⁹ Secondly, it is more feasible for this group to travel by bus and train, as their total mobility duration is usually much longer than for other Erasmus+ programme action types. However, in the future, we envision extending the Erasmus+ ticket to all Erasmus+ participants.

1. Status quo: Erasmus+ students are not incentivised to travel sustainably

The sustainability incentives introduced in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide of the European Commission of 25 March 2021¹⁰ are insufficient and their implementation is too bureaucratic to make a difference to participants' travel behaviour.¹¹

The new Erasmus+ programme provides students who choose a sustainable method of transport with a single top-up contribution. Currently, this amounts to 50 EUR, along with up to four additional days of individual support. The top-up does not even come close to equalling the difference in cost between two cross-border rail tickets and two plane tickets.

Under these circumstances, Interrail Global Passes are also not economically feasible for Erasmus+ participants. Two tickets (to cover the outward and return journeys) would cost at least 370 EUR without discounts.¹² Moreover, most high-speed and night trains require a reservation for an additional fee. Finally, not all European train, bus, and ferry companies are part of the Interrail network, so not all Erasmus+ students could benefit from the Interrail Global Passes.

Purchasing individual train tickets instead of Interrail passes is also too expensive for Erasmus+ participants. For example, the price of a flight between Madrid and Rome, two popular Erasmus+ destinations, starts at around 30 EUR and has an estimated duration of 5.5 hours, which includes the trips to and from both airports to the city centre. The same route by train would take over 19 hours, for a starting price of roughly 180 EUR.¹³ Beyond the differences in time and cost, not being able to book the different tickets in advance and plan the way properly can be a deterring factor, as going on Erasmus+ is already quite stressful.

⁹ Finnish National Agency for Education: Feasibility Study on Compensation Scenarios for the New and Greener Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027, 2021 (= Reports and Surveys 2021:10), p. 18, https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/Feasibility_Study_Compensation_ErasmusPlus.pdf.

¹⁰ European Commission: Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021, 25 March 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/default/files/2021-erasmusplus-programme-guide_v3_en.pdf.

¹¹ Erasmus by Train: An Evaluation of the program's sustainability strategy, Statement on the Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021, April 2021, https://erasmusbytrain.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/final-statement_EbT_Erasmus-guide-2021.docx.pdf.

¹² See the different options and respective prices on: <https://www.interrail.eu/en/interrail-passes/global-pass>.

¹³ All data accessed at: <https://www.rome2rio.com/map/Madrid/Rome>.

Furthermore, the implementation of the top-up has already proven to be challenging for international offices. As of now, the top-up is not included in the diverse mobility software universities use. On top of tracking this spending (already an extra task), international offices need to collect a declaration of honour from all students applying for the top-up. While this declaration is intended to exempt students from providing other forms of evidence of their “green” journeys, most universities require that students provide their tickets anyway, and thus have to review and store an extra document.

In conclusion, there are currently no attractive options for Erasmus+ students who wish to travel across Europe sustainably and affordably. While the solution proposed by the European Commission is a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough to incentivise sustainable travel. Additionally, it creates an extra bureaucratic burden for participating students and institutions.

2. What an Erasmus+ ticket could look like: expectations of Erasmus+ students

A new Erasmus+ ticket must differ from the Interrail Global Passes in some key respects. From the perspective of Erasmus+ students, the following requirements for an Erasmus+ ticket are particularly important:

- Free of charge: The ticket should be completely free of charge for Erasmus+ students. This would allow as many Erasmus+ students as possible to make the switch from air to bus and train travel. Given the extremely low cost of travelling with budget airlines and the reduced travel time in many cases, even relatively low prices for an Erasmus+ ticket may fail to incentivise sustainable travel.
- Outward and return journey: The ticket should cover Erasmus+ students’ outward journey from their home country to their exchange destination as well as their return journey in two separately bookable parts.
- Stops along the way: It should be possible for programme participants to stop for several days on the journey with the aim of discovering unknown cities or visiting friends on the way. This would allow participants to discover Europe in its diversity by effectively starting the Erasmus+ exchange experience before their studies even start. Such freedom to explore is a major advantage of travelling by train and bus compared to travelling by plane; it would also strengthen the European character of the Erasmus+ programme and make longer journeys appealing instead of burdensome.

- Broad validity throughout Europe: The ticket should be valid for as many long-distance and regional trains, long-distance buses, and ferries as possible throughout Europe without students having to pay additional fees, including high-speed and night trains. This would allow for the highest level of intermodal routing, which ultimately serves to reduce u travel time, cost, and ecological impact.¹⁴ In particular, night trains are an easy, time-efficient way for students to travel around Europe.
- Simple, digital ticket booking: The ticket should be digitally bookable in a single booking process, for example, via a special mobile app or website. A prerequisite for this is a digital journey planner to suggest suitable travel connections through Europe for different modes of transport. The Erasmus+ ticket thereby has the potential to give new impetus to the ambitious project of a European multimodal journey planner. The ticket should be easily accessible via a mobile app, such as the Erasmus+ App,¹⁵ and thus be a part of the application process.
- Free luggage: The ticket should allow students to take two large pieces of luggage free of charge. Free luggage, together with the free Wi-Fi offered on many trains and long-distance buses, offers a great practical advantage over travelling by plane.
- Passenger rights: The ticket should guarantee Erasmus+ students to arrive at their Erasmus+ exchange destination or back to their home countries at no extra cost in the event of delays or cancellations.

3. Ideas to reduce the overall ticket price

With the proposed Erasmus+ ticket, we aim to provide a solution to green the mobility of the Erasmus+ programme. This solution is meant to be more cost-effective for the European Commission than purchasing many costly Interrail Global Passes or keeping the travel top-ups implemented via the Erasmus+ Programme Guide of the European Commission of 24 November 2021¹⁶. To that end, we worked with transit companies to compile ideas that would allow them to offer lower-cost tickets for European cross-border travel.

¹⁴ Vincent-Immanuel Herr and Martin Speer: #DiscoverEU: Sharpening Europe's Greenest and Most Accessible Youth Mobility Program, Policy Paper, 2021, p. 15, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f3d1ae50822102a04039561/t/6127a0a09f907f2b2c51a043/1629986976874/FreeInterrail_Policy-Paper_2021_Print_21S_A4.pdf.

¹⁵ See the website of the Erasmus+ App: <https://erasmusapp.eu/>.

¹⁶ European Commission: Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2022, 24 November 2021, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-11/2022-erasmusplus-programme-guide.pdf>.

To that end, we have collected ideas which allow transport operators to offer a cheaper ticket for European cross-border travel. In this process, we sought to build on existing projects and structures to reduce costs and streamline the implementation of the Erasmus+ ticket. We believe that the following compromises, if proposed to transport operators, could significantly reduce the cost and complexity of an Erasmus+ ticket:

- No public transport: The Erasmus+ ticket would not need to include local public transport.
- Booking one month in advance: An Erasmus+ ticket could require students to book one month in advance of their outward journey and one month in advance of their return journey. This should not be a problem for Erasmus+ students, as they already know at this stage when their study abroad will start; they would currently also need to book flights well in advance to make them affordable.
- Committing to the exact travel connection beforehand: Erasmus+ participants would have to book the exact travel stops along the route in advance. Reducing the flexibility of the Erasmus+ ticket in comparison to existing Interrail passes should reduce the total cost of the journey.
- Special quotas: Transport companies should have the possibility to limit the number of Erasmus+ students on a given connection through special Erasmus+ ticket quotas. This would not only encourage students to book as early as possible, but more importantly would shift some travellers to connections that are less in demand and thus more economical for transport companies. This could be done by not displaying transport connections in the travel planner once the Erasmus+ ticket quota has already been exhausted. However, it is crucial that the ticket quotas are generous enough that the majority of Erasmus+ students can use a fast and comfortable connection.

4. Suggestions for implementing the Erasmus+ ticket

In our vision of an Erasmus+ ticket, Erasmus+ students would get access to the booking platform after receiving confirmation of their Erasmus+ grant. Ideally, access to the platform would be granted via a personal code. This code could be generated by the data management systems used in the international offices of higher education institutions. For example, the unique code of the online application that is imported into UniSolution's MoveOn data management system could serve as such a code. The access code could be

provided to grantees alongside the personalised Erasmus+ documents that they receive via email well in advance of their stay abroad.

The Erasmus+ ticket should cover all parts of the ticket price and should be bookable in an integrated system. Students that nonetheless have to book reservations outside the system should be provided with comprehensive information on how to make their bookings and receive reimbursement. As soon as possible, the booking system should switch to a unified booking platform as part of the European multimodal journey planner.

The ticket itself should be provided to students in digital form (via email) and should be accessible through the login section of the Erasmus+ App. A new subsection for the Erasmus+ ticket could be created in the section “Erasmus+ journey” on the app. Useful travel tips could also be shared in the app.

There are many possibilities for making the Erasmus+ ticket even more attractive for students beyond the ticket itself. For example, students could be actively encouraged to discover Europe on their way and make stopovers in different cities through special discounts for cultural and leisure facilities. Also, local sections of the Erasmus Student Network could support students by recommending accommodation options and encouraging students to join local activities. Additionally, there could be a section in the Erasmus+ App where students taking the same route or even the same buses, ferries, or trains can get to know each other and plan trips and activities together. The collected suggestions accompanying such a ticket are based on suggestions made by respondents to the Eurail survey on participants in Erasmus+ mobility programmes.¹⁷

We advocate for innovative and collaborative financing mechanisms to turn this ticket into reality. We ask all stakeholders involved, including European institutions, transport operators and national authorities, to open a conversation on how they can be part of this structural change. EU member states may be open to contributing financially to this effort if it is framed as a climate change mitigation project. The funding of the Erasmus+ ticket should not be at the expense of the DiscoverEU initiative, as both initiatives could jointly contribute to a shift in mobility behaviour.

In the future, the idea of an Erasmus+ ticket should be implemented across the entire Erasmus+ programme. The lessons learned from the ticket for Higher Education Mobility participants can be applied to mitigate transport-related emissions in all Erasmus+ programme action types.

¹⁷ ESN and Eurail: Students' Mobility Needs: Snapshots of a Eurail survey on participants in Erasmus+ Mobility Programmes, 2020, p.14, https://esn.org/sites/default/files/news/erasmus_mobility_survey_report_-_final_0.pdf.

5. Next step: a pilot project to evaluate the impact of the Erasmus+ ticket

We suggest taking advantage of the momentum around the European Year of Youth to launch a pilot project according to Article 58(2), point a) of the EU Financial Regulation¹⁸ to test the new Erasmus+ ticket with a limited number of students within the next year. By providing Erasmus+ students, especially those with fewer opportunities, with free Erasmus+ tickets over a two-year period, we want to obtain answers to the following questions, among others:

- How does the ticket impact Erasmus+ students' travel choices?
- Do participants take advantage of the opportunity to make stopovers on their journey?
- What is the average journey duration?
- How is the ticket perceived by the participants?
- Is the ticket economically viable for transport operators?

In this context, we would like to stress that a differentiation in the uptake of such a ticket is expected. A well-designed pilot project would reveal whether participants' geographical locations, socioeconomic circumstances or other factors influence their willingness to use the ticket.

Via this joint call, we ask for your help with the implementation of the aforementioned pilot project. This could be done either by exercising your right to propose it yourself or by supporting such a proposal put forward by Members of the European Parliament, especially in the pre-assessment process.

The evidence is unequivocal: now is the time to change the way we travel. The Erasmus+ generation is ready to make the switch to sustainable travel. We look forward to joining forces in the European Year of Youth to make this vision a reality.

Kind regards,



Juan Rayón González

President of the Erasmus Student Network



Carl Schüppel

on behalf of Erasmus by Train e.V.

¹⁸ Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018R1046&from=EN>.