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GUIDELINES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS MORE SUSTAINABLE COOPERATION

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By Viktoriya Terzieva & Helena Alves

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I. Introduction

The participation of higher education staff in the Erasmus+ programme has increased significantly, reaching more than 800,000 for the period 2014-2020¹. With the approved doubled budget for the current Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027), the number of participants will be even higher, as it is expected to reach 2.5 times more people than the previous programme. The Erasmus Charter for Higher Education principles also requires Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to implement the priorities of the Erasmus+ programme, namely by promoting environmentally friendly practices in all activities related to the programme. The combination of these two factors means that HEIs need to create unprecedented strategies to lead more sustainable transnational partnerships in the framework of the programme.

Indeed, international travel is the number one factor causing the negative environmental impact of Erasmus+ mobility. As several studies (ESN & Eurail, 2020; Green Erasmus, 2022; Gabrielczak & Sokołowicz, 2021) confirm, planes are still the most used mode of transport by students and staff participating in the Erasmus+ programme. But they are also the most impactful in terms of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

The Erasmus Goes Green (EGG) project focuses exactly on the transport-related carbon footprint (CF) of higher education students and staff taking part in mobility activities within Europe across the three key actions of the programme. The project's consortium has developed tools, reports and guidelines to contribute to the environmentally sustainable future of the Erasmus+ programme.

Sustainable transnational partnerships in the context of the Erasmus Goes Green project

In the context of the EGG project, a *sustainable transnational partnership* means one that promotes greener interactions between institutions, especially by promoting the most sustainable way of transport in any travel that might be required to develop this partnership. Universities, and the entire higher education sector, have a unique position at the crossroads of education, research and innovation, in shaping sustainable and resilient economies, and in making the European Union greener, more inclusive and more digital². This is why the European Commission (EC) plans to deepen transnational cooperation and build effective bridges for more cooperation within the HE sector. The nature of mobility as part of the partnerships and the period of staying abroad varies from staff mobility projects for training, academic research, transnational cooperation meetings, conferences and others. Considering the number of travels within the programme and their tendency to increase, the environmental and climate goals became a horizontal priority for Erasmus+ for the new period (2021-2027). However, the CULT Committee research (IPOL, 2020) shows that there is a lack of

¹ <https://monitor.icef.com/2019/03/erasmus-supported-nearly-800000-international-placements-2017/>

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_36



“baseline” and “there is a need for further building on existing good practices / incentives developed by the implementing institutions” as well as a “need to improve indicators and tools for measuring the environmental impact of programme activities”.

To answer these specific needs, the EGG consortium created a website featuring [a carbon footprint calculator](#) that allows students and staff to visualise the CO₂ footprint of the different means of transport that they can use to go on mobility abroad. As mentioned in the report [Assessment of the transport-related carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme](#), it is hard to imagine a very drastic reduction in the academic mobility of the staff members, since the education community is one of the most mobile in most countries of the world. Furthermore, there is a hesitancy to reduce mobilities as there is a growing need for scientific collaboration due to the many economic and social challenges that Europe and the world are facing right now. However, the Erasmus community is aware of the fact that transnational partnerships are not quite sustainable at the moment, which is why the consortium of the EGG project made a diagnosis of the carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme as an important starting point for further measures. The results of the overview of the Erasmus programme (2014-2021) can be found in the [report](#) of Gabrielczak and Sokołowicz (2021), p.78-105.

The following document presents guidelines which outline the EGG’s consortium understanding of environmentally sustainable Erasmus+ partnerships and intends to assist HEIs and other organisations taking part in transnational cooperation projects and partnerships funded through KA2 or KA3 in this direction. They include concrete advice and practical tips for top management, staff members participating in transnational partnerships and Erasmus+ coordinators on how to implement, maintain and encourage sustainable travels. The guidelines will also help Erasmus+ coordinators to guide exchange students on how to use the [CO₂ calculator](#) for their mobility.

II. Preliminary work

The core objective of the EGG project is to find solutions to reduce the transport-related carbon footprint of higher education students and staff taking part in Erasmus mobility. Before we focus on the recommendations, however, we will explore several facts and figures related to the previous Erasmus+ programme period’s carbon footprint. The report [Assessment of the transport-related carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme](#), developed under the EGG project, is split into three sub-parts: Sub-report 1: Comprehensive review of carbon emissions, Sub-report 2: The carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2021, Sub-report 3: The carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027.

The following guidelines are based on the findings in sub-report 2, concerning the carbon footprint of the previous period of the programme, whose key findings can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Overview of the Erasmus+ mobilities 2014-2020

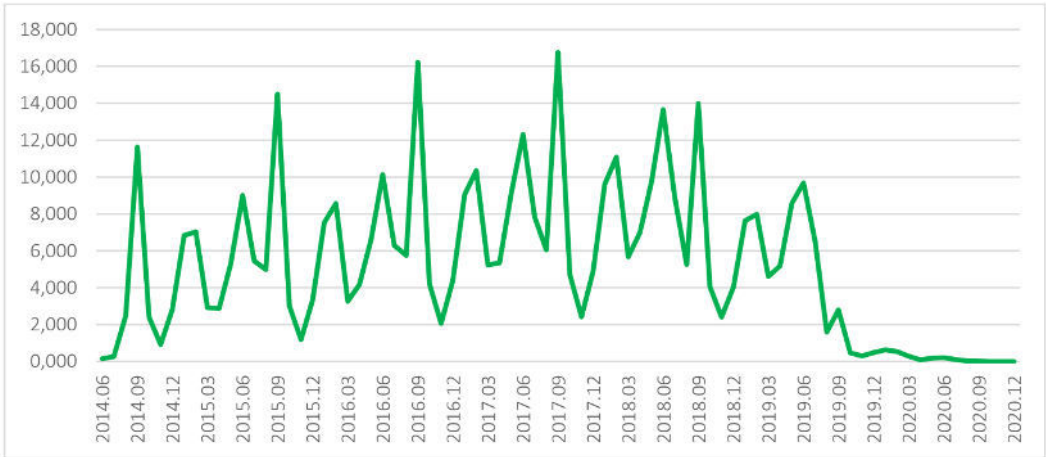


1. In the period of 2014–2020, a total number of 1,874,689 mobilities were successfully conducted (81% student mobilities, 19% staff mobilities).
2. The average distance travelled by staff is 1,754km (compared to 1,374km for students).
3. The average length of mobility for staff is five days
4. Total carbon footprint emissions of high, average and low emissions scenarios (CO₂eq. tonnes):
 - High emissions scenario: 1,503,646
 - Average emissions scenario: 1,133,654
 - Low emissions scenario: 668,750

When comparing the total emissions of the Erasmus+ programme 2014–2020 (409,914 CO₂eq. tonnes) to that of the programme 2021–2027, even the low emissions scenario is over 1,5 times bigger than the total emissions of the previous programme. This is naturally due to the huge difference between the budgeted number of participants, hence mobilities, between the programmes.

The carbon footprint emission of the Erasmus+ programme is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Carbon footprint emission of the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020, baseline variant : (Gabrielczak and Sokołowicz, 2021)



Source: own elaboration based on FRSE.

After the estimations made for the past Erasmus+ period, the consortium developed three different scenarios (low, average, high emissions) to forecast the carbon footprint of the next period (2021-

2027). The forecast of the carbon footprint of the current Erasmus+ programme is based on two variables:

- **Estimated total number of mobilities during the period of the programme**
- **Estimated number of changes in the share of flights versus bus as a form of travelling**

The first variable is based on the budgets for the two periods, 2014-2021 and 2021-2027. An assumption is made that the share of mobilities for the new budget remains the same as in the previous period, which gives a forecasted number of 7,000,000 mobilities. In the forecast, the budgeted number of mobilities in the Erasmus+ programme 2014–2020 is compared to the actual, realised number of mobilities during that period. The actual number of mobilities in the 2014-2020 period has been the basis for three scenarios as the number of expected mobilities for the next period. In all scenarios, it is assumed that the mobility rate increases every year.

Table 2: Factors that affect scenarios, Kokko & Saarela, 2021

Scenarios /factors	Low emissions	Average emissions	High emissions
Number of participants	Decreases/ budget increase is not met	No change other than a slight increase according to the budget	Increases based on the budget, back to pre-pandemic numbers fast
Distance to destination	Decreases, closer destinations preferred	Average distance stays the same as in the previous programme	Average distance increases
Mode of transportation	Bus and train preferred	Stays the same as in the previous programme	Plane is preferred
Brexit	Major effect, as the UK not participating	No effect	No effect
COVID-19 pandemic	Major effect (mutations, vaccination)	No long-term effect, back to normal in 2022	No long-term effect, back to normal in 2022
Future travel trends	Less travelling, shorter distances, bus preferred	Back to normal in 2023	Back to pre-pandemic number in 2022, plane preferred, longer distances



<p>RESULTS</p>	<p>The total number of mobilities during the whole programme is met at the level of 60% compared to the budgeted number of mobilities. Share of flights is estimated to decrease by 30% in total. In this case, flights are substituted by travels by coach.</p>	<p>The budget used is only 85,2%. The share of flights is assumed to decrease by 15%. Green thinking and grants for choosing a green mode of transportation affect the behaviour of participants only slightly. Travelling, overall, goes back to normal in 2023.</p>	<p>The number of mobilities increases significantly. Mobility starts at full speed in the beginning of 2022 and goes back to normal fast. The number of mobilities reaches the budgeted number of mobilities and all the budget is used by the end of the programme. The number of participants is not affected by Brexit nor by the pandemic</p> <p>In the long-term,. green thinking does not affect choices in travelling nor distance to destination. Thus, in this scenario, the share of flights is not assumed to decrease or increase.</p>
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Results show that the differences between the scenarios are significant. Total emissions of each scenario increase over time. The curve of the high emissions scenario increases the sharpest. Results of all the scenarios are presented in graphical mode in Figure 2 below. Total emissions of the high emissions scenario (1,503,646 CO₂eq. tonnes) are over twice as big as total emissions of the low emissions scenario (668,750 CO₂eq. tonnes). Total emissions of the high emissions scenario are 1.,3 times higher than total emissions of the average emissions scenario (1,133,654 CO₂eq. tonnes). Total emissions of the average emissions scenario are 1.7 times higher than total emissions of the low emissions scenario. Total CF emissions for each scenario are presented in Table 3.



Figure 2: Results of the forecast of low, average and high emissions scenarios; (Kokko and Saarela, 2021)

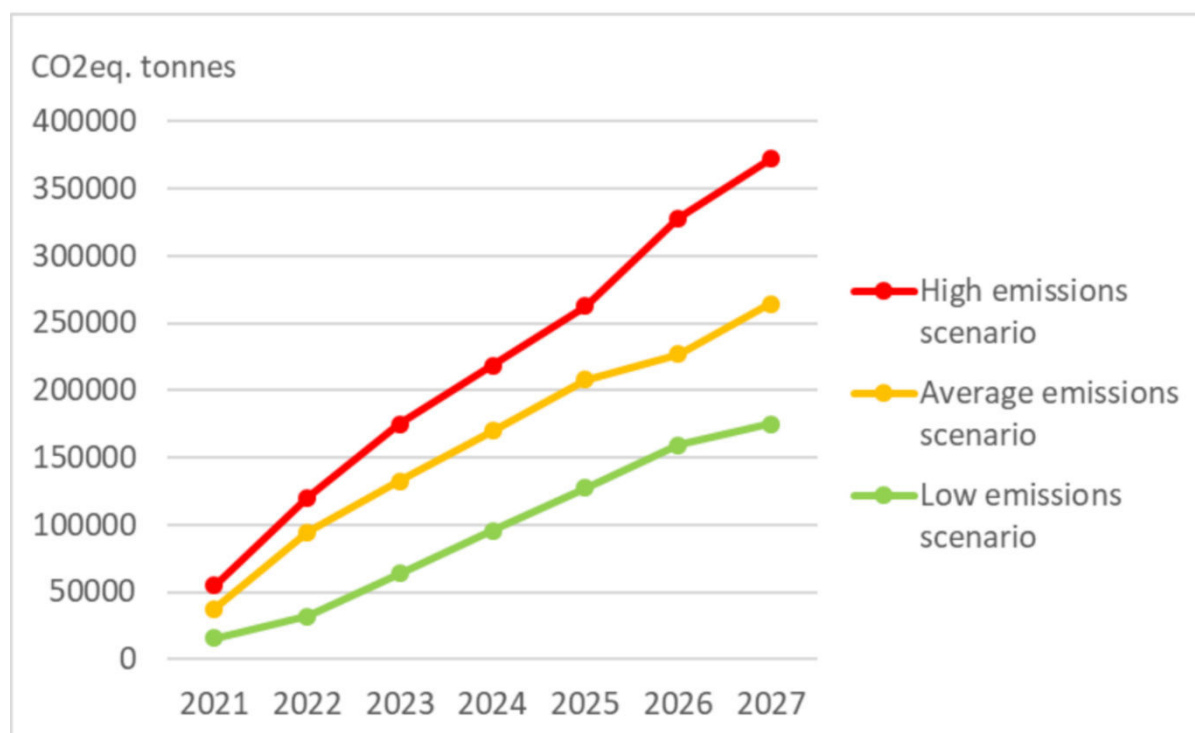


Table 3: Total carbon footprint emissions of high, average and low emissions scenarios (CO2eq. tonnes); (Kokko and Saarela, 2021)

Scenario	Total carbon footprint emissions (CO2eq. tonnes)
High emissions scenario	1,503,646
Average emissions scenario	1,133,654
Low emissions scenario	668,750

When comparing the total emissions of the Erasmus+ programme 2014–2020 (409,914 CO₂eq. tonnes) to the estimated emissions of the programme 2021–2027, even the low emissions scenario is higher than the total emissions of the previous programme. This is naturally due to the huge difference between the budgeted number of participants, hence mobilities, between the programmes.

With this inevitable increase in mind, it is even more important that we change the paradigm of transnational partnerships and ensure that they are as environmentally sustainable as possible, so that

its impact on the environment does not overrule its positive outcomes. The next section of the guidelines will reveal different recommendations for HEIs and Erasmus+ coordinators to have more sustainable transnational partnerships.

III. Recommendations and Actions for sustainable transnational partnerships

Actions for HEIs leadership

1. Set targets for reducing HEIs travel emissions

Planning and implementing a structural change should always start with setting clear targets for its achievement. Making transnational partnerships sustainable is an ambitious objective for HEIs and carries a number of obstacles and challenges. Firstly, it is critical that all stakeholders that are part of the decision-making process agree on the relevant change. Therefore, ensuring the support of the leadership, the availability of financial resources, as well as the support of transnational partners and other important stakeholders is part of the preparatory process for the desired change. The need to allocate resources, especially financial, to support the transition to sustainable travelling, could also be an obstacle. However, an institution that aims to decrease the negative environmental impact of its transnational partnerships, should be ready to allocate appropriate resources to achieve its goals.

When setting targets, it is essential to use the SMART principle:

- **Specific** – make your goals specific and narrow for more effective planning
- **Measurable** – define what evidence will prove you are making progress and reevaluate when necessary
- **Achievable** – a realistic but stretching target within the availability of resources, knowledge and time
- **Relevant** – the target should align with the Institution’s values and long-term objectives
- **Time-based** – a period needs to be specified within which the target will be met (e.g. one year)

COVID-19 has reduced travel massively and increased the use of digital communications (online conferences, virtual mobility, etc.). With the experience gained during the pandemic, HEIs could set new targets, by revising pre-COVID practices (purposes for travel, duration, number of staff going, means of transport used) and analysing the carbon footprint associated with these practices. After that, they could consider adapting the current period and setting clear targets – tons of CO2 per year, reduction in % year to year, etc.

Example: The University of Glasgow recently released a document [Guidance for sustainable business travel for staff and postgraduate researchers](#), in which they set clear targets for the next 10 years:

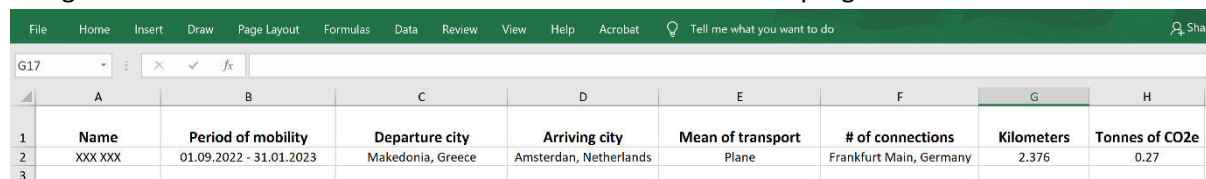
“To reduce emissions from Business Travel from 13,194 ton CO₂e in 2018-19 to 5597 ton CO₂e in 2029-30. This equates to a reduction of 7.5% year on year, and is in line with recent advice from the United Nations’ Environment Programme”

2. Keep record of the Erasmus+ mobility travel details

The EGG consortium finds it is essential to create a tracking file collecting all necessary data to calculate the CO₂ emissions from each trip related to transnational partnerships. With such data available for HEIs, it will be possible to analyse what improvements could be made to reduce the transport-related carbon footprint and what specific measures could be implemented in this direction. Currently, there are no publicly available guides showing the process of calculating and recording the carbon footprint produced by partnerships’ related travels. Moreover, as described in detail in the report on [Measures to reduce the transport-related carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme](#), section 3.6 Organisational changes, travel bookings are usually arranged by the individual or by the support staff. It is thus suggested that institutions should consider centralising travel bookings, whether through an outsourced travel agency, an internal booking office, or each department’s support staff, for the sole purpose of creating a mechanism of collecting necessary data to calculate the carbon footprint related to transnational partnerships. *Cost, duration and destination* of the journeys are also important data to be collected. Therefore, the Mobility tool and the staff expenses claim forms are two very useful supporting sources of data.

Even though hiring a travel agency or allocating more internal administrative staff to manage booking can represent additional costs for the HEIs, we should not neglect the fact that the lack of clear booking guidelines can lead to higher costs of trips booked by individuals. Moreover, bookings made by bigger bodies (HEIs or travel agencies on behalf of HEIs) and not individuals, could potentially benefit from special preferential prices of travel tickets.

A simple recording file such as shown below would allow the Erasmus+ coordinators to collect and categorise all travel information of the programme-related mobilities.



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	Name	Period of mobility	Departure city	Arriving city	Mean of transport	# of connections	Kilometers	Tonnes of CO ₂ e
2	XXX XXX	01.09.2022 - 31.01.2023	Makedonia, Greece	Amsterdam, Netherlands	Plane	Frankfurt Main, Germany	2.376	0.27
3								

3. Encourage staff to improve their transnational partnerships' carbon efficiency.

Improving carbon efficiency while keeping the benefits of travelling is probably the most attractive approach to staff when it comes to sustainability measures. These “improving” actions can take different forms as described below.

- **Combining multiple meetings in a single trip**

If time, partner's availability and personal life allow it, the leadership should encourage staff members to organise meetings and events on close dates, so they can use their journey as best as they can to optimise the costs.

- **Advocate for more sustainable means of transport**

Using the institution's social media and promoting tools and documentation that encourage staff members to reduce their CO₂ emissions from travelling are just one of the actions that can be done in this direction. Highlighting the benefits of sustainable means of transport and cheering those that already took a step forward is another great way to encourage staff members. Further suggestions on how to raise awareness and achieve a voluntary change in travel behaviour can be found in the report on [Measures to reduce the transport-related carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme](#), section 3.2. Awareness.

HEIs could use the below-mentioned hints to encourage staff members to use sustainable means of transport:

- Trains and buses are often more suitable for working and arrive directly at the city centres;
- In many cases, travel by road (train, bus) is similar to travel by plane in terms of duration, as you avoid passing through security, arriving 2-3 hours in advance and commuting from the airport to the city;
- Carpooling can be more environmentally friendly, less costly and also allow you to get to know your colleagues on the way;
- Using sleeping trains could allow you to save time.

- **Promoting alternatives to travel**

Leadership could now build on staff experiences of working from home during the COVID-19 crisis to prioritise the use of videoconferencing facilities accessible to all staff, with appropriate guidance and support on their use. Thus, it is also important to disseminate guidelines on how to ensure a successful partnership online. For example, being in contact regularly is very important to keep good relations with partners. The partnership could agree on a certain frequency of meetings (e.g. every month, every second week, etc.) to make everyone aware of the advancement of the tasks related to their project. It is also important to ensure that every partner is comfortable using the different communication and collaboration tools, which is why a training on the tools that will be used should be held at the beginning of the partnership.

The leadership should revise and modify their internal communication as well, to enhance the focus on sustainable travel and speak up about the institution's targets and the importance of reducing the carbon footprint from travel. Spreading the word is as important as doing the actual changes!

4. Create an implementation and monitoring plan and assign responsibilities

No guidelines will work unless there is not a clear strategy on how, what and who will implement and monitor the actions. There should be a person/group responsible for putting in place the guidelines and ensuring the monitoring. For example, a report with data on carbon emissions from staff travel produced twice a year will allow the institution to monitor if the actual emissions produced are in line with the set targets.

It is worthwhile to identify the key performance indicators (KPIs)

Such indicators could be:

- Maximum number of staff members travelling per year
- Maximum number of total HEIs' CO₂ emissions for travel purposes per year
- Maximum number of flights
- Target number of CO₂ emissions saved through videoconferencing for year X (ensure data is collected on travel avoided)

Actions for staff members participating in transnational partnerships

1. Use more sustainable means of transport

HEIs are now supporting students and staff members in choosing sustainable travel modes by giving extra funds and time for travel. Moreover, travelling by train or bus offers opportunities for off- or on-line working. If you plan ahead to work on the train or bus, this will optimise your time.

For the 2021-2027 programme, the reduction of the carbon footprint has become a horizontal priority for all mobility activities. To this end, staff members will be given the choice between regular travel support, with the same amounts as defined in decision C(2017)6864, and "green travel support" with



increased levels of contribution when travelling by a low-emissions means of transport such as train or bus.

Table 4: Travel Support for the mobility of staff (KA1)– Standard, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2022 (version 2 of 26/01/2022), p.71

Travel support – Standard	
Travel distances	Amount
Between 10 and 99 KM	23 EUR per participant
Between 100 and 499 KM	180 EUR per participant
Between 500 and 1999 KM	275 EUR per participant
Between 2000 and 2999 KM	360 EUR per participant
Between 3000 and 3999 KM	530 EUR per participant
Between 4000 and 7999 KM	820 EUR per participant
8000 KM or more	1500 EUR per participant

Table 5: Green Travel support for the mobility of staff (KA1), Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2022 (version 2 of 26/01/2022), p.71

Green Travel support	
Travel distances	Amount
Between 100 and 499 KM	210 EUR per participant
Between 500 and 1999 KM	320 EUR per participant
Between 2000 and 2999 KM	410 EUR per participant
Between 3000 and 3999 KM	610 EUR per participant

The EGG consortium prepared a Handbook for HEIs' students, providing various tips and sources on how to make environmentally-friendly decisions and how to plan and book sustainable trips, which can be very useful for staff members as well.



2. Avoid unnecessary journeys and make a better use of time

Let's face it! Teleconferencing and videoconferencing are now at the height of their development and represent a better accessibility for disadvantaged groups and climate consciousness. Moreover, we all now have a lot of experience with online events. All those technical difficulties that were so impossible to surmount were shoved aside by the COVID pandemic.

The average distance travelled by staff members is 1754 km (longer compared to average distance travelled by students - 1374 km) (Gabrielczak and Sokołowicz, 2021). To avoid unnecessary journeys, project coordinators could schedule different events in close or back-to-back dates, if possible, in order to combine one travel for more purposes and/or for different projects.

3. Modify partnership documents to mention the environmental responsibility of the partners.

This recommendation suggests the revision of documents such as the project application, the partnership agreement (PA) and the quality assurance (QA plan) to mention clause/s for environmental sustainability, what could be the contribution of the partners and key performance indicators (KPI) for sustainable travelling. Such updates of the documents could include:

Project Application

To mention what each partner institution would do to increase the environmental sustainability of that partnership or for their institution with the particular project.

The CO₂ emissions to be calculated for the different travel options to reach any partner city by the other partners, and a CO₂ mindful decision to be made for attending meetings physically.

Quality Assurance plan

To include KPI for keeping the CO₂ emissions under a certain level for all project-related travels (partners attending project meetings, participants attending multiplier events, partners attending events, etc.)

Partnership Agreement

Special provisions on the responsibility of the partners on the carbon emissions generated in this project:



- Agreement to have one person per institution for the physical meetings unless there is a specific need for more people to be physically present. In this case, online participation should be considered beforehand
- Agreement to meet at the partner institutions offices that are best located and more easily reached by other partners in terms of CO₂
- Agreement for one face-to-face transnational project meeting instead of several

The latter represents an opportunity that was a subject of another EU-funded project called [The ONE Project](#). The One project consortium developed a new agile method for EU collaboration prioritising the digital real-time form of collaboration. They also developed a Business Case which provides evidence of the CO₂ footprint of the European projects, showcasing the difference of 10 tons of CO₂e from the all physical meetings scenario (four) to just one.

Actions for Erasmus+ coordinators

1. Raise awareness among Erasmus+ students on sustainable travelling

When Erasmus+ coordinators encourage their students to travel sustainably, it is worthy to emphasise the advantages of switching to sustainable modes of transportation in order to reduce the perceived difficulty and commit to the alternative way of travelling.

2. Provide guided travel planning to students

Awareness measures usually have the most potential when they are integrated and reinforced with other measures aiming to reduce the travel-related carbon footprint of HEIs' internationalisation. This was an important remark made by the focus groups with students during the preparation of the [Measures to reduce the transport-related carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme](#) report. An example was given with one HEI that shows sustainable travel options for each host HEI during the selection phase of the Erasmus+ mobility programme application. Here, the Erasmus+ coordination offices are the best placed to prepare and distribute this information to students.

Sometimes willingness is not enough to start using other modes of international travelling. There are countries and regions around Europe, where booking systems of trains and other modes of transport are not as developed as in other places, such as Western Europe. Erasmus+ coordinators can support students by implementing guiding travel planning and recording booking decisions between the partner countries' destinations. Different visual and operational actions are possible here, most of them mentioned in the [Measures to reduce the transport-related carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ programme](#) report, section 3.5 Non-financial support:



- Decision-making tools: maps, flowcharts;
- Providing the opportunity for feedback and advice by former exchange students;
- Creating and systematically updating a travel guidance for students interested in mobility;
- Having a point of contact or an advisory group for travel-related questions, etc.

For instance, Erasmus+ coordinators can share stories and experiences from former exchange students as part of their sustainable travelling awareness-raising campaign. This is a great way to promote a “can-do” attitude among other students and motivate them to follow a good example. The EGG Handbook for students gives various different supporting measures of sustainable travelling which students can benefit from.

3. Provide easy access to complementary travel products / services

It is advisable to offer and/or integrate complementary travel products and services into the exchange arranging process. Interrail passes³ are one example of such products, but often it is necessary to point them out to students before they start preparing for their mobility.

4. Promote the usage of the EGG CO₂ calculator to students.

Understanding CO₂ consumption and the impact it has on the environment is crucial to motivate students to travel sustainably. The EGG project has created a dedicated [website](#) to help students understand, evaluate and decide which is the most environmentally-friendly way to begin (and end) their Erasmus journey.

The Erasmus+ coordinator is perfectly placed to encourage the sustainable travel of students on mobility. The [EGG Handbook for HEI’s students](#) demonstrates in detail how to use the CO₂ calculator. It is advisable for coordinators to consult this guide and actively encourage students to freely explore the options they have to reach the destination of their choice.

IV. Conclusion

The objective of these Guidelines for HEIs is to present an overview of different actions that could be implemented by institutions and their staff members to make their transnational cooperation more environmentally sustainable. Setting clear targets, communicating effectively, encouraging staff to travel sustainably, and implementing and monitoring a sustainable strategy, are the key messages for HEIs set forth in this document.

Staff members participating in international partnerships are encouraged to recognise the benefits of alternative means of travel and video-conferencing, as well as to consider reducing the unnecessary journeys and combining meetings in a single travel. An important point is made to revise and update

³ <https://www.interrail.eu/en/interrail-passes>

partnership documents, such as the project application, the agreement contract and quality assurance plan, to mention roles and responsibilities towards keeping their partnership sustainable.

Finally, this document addresses Erasmus+ coordinators specifically and gives advice on how to raise awareness and guide students towards making sustainable choices for their mobility travels.

The recommendations are efficient and yet realistic and require only a small, but joint effort from the higher education society to respond to the urgent need to take action on climate change.

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