



10 ways to make your HEIs internationalisation practices more sustainable

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Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have always been transformational agents of society, given their important role as sharers of knowledge and creators of innovation. With the looming threat of climate change pending upon us, HEIs are in an excellent position to set the tone for society as a whole to follow. The European Green Deal will require a colossal community effort, and what better moment for HEIs to exert their influence?

Indeed, they have done so in the last few years, especially in the internationalisation area. The steps are already taken in the implementation of the European Green Deal mark a good start, but more than a change of laws, we need to change the mindset and ensure that people are aware of their contribution to this major problem and understand what they can do to reduce their impact and offset it.

In order to capitalize on what has been done and inspire others to join forces towards the ultimate goal of sustainable internationalisation, we have researched HEIs sustainable practices around Europe in the framework of the EU-funded “Green Erasmus” project. We invite you to discover 10 of the most relevant ones:

1. If you never measure, then you never know

Adopting measuring methods will help you better understand the impact of your HEI’s internationalisation-related emissions. Moreover, it will provide you with a clear picture, essential to make the first step towards change. The results can also be important to exert some pressure for a behavioural change. The Erasmus University of Rotterdam publishes each year a CO2 footprint report that includes information about the emissions per source of CO2, which can be very useful to grasp where the changes are most urgent and if the measures already implemented have had an impact.

Additionally, the University of Edinburgh also released a [report](#) on the methodology for recording and assessing business travel within the university. This type of reporting could be used for different types of travel, such as international mobility students’ journeys within their host country, or visitors and invited guests of the university, etc. By gathering this information, HEIs would be able to assess which measure would be more interesting to reduce their carbon footprint, and also determine which journeys are necessary and which are not. A valuable tool is currently being developed under the Erasmus+ “Erasmus Goes Green” project: the carbon footprint calculator. Especially designed to fit Erasmus+ mobilities’ reality, the calculator will be a helpful measuring instrument.

2. Walk the talk (academics taking fewer flights)

Even though it is unrealistic to expect all air travel to disappear, Kjerstin Aukrust, associate professor at the University of Oslo (UiO), noted how many academics travel by air, often unnecessarily. Academic staff might hence

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consider reducing their travel and adopting environmentally-friendly habits. Leading by example would make it more likely for students to follow suit. In this topic, the University of Zurich has recently launched an initiative, “[Make science, not miles](#)”, that advocates for forms of scientific collaboration that require fewer flights. It includes a set of recommendations on how to reduce flight-related GHG emissions, as well as what can be done when air travel cannot be avoided, among other resources.

3. Bicycle renting is wheely good

A cheaper bicycle renting system makes it easier to commute to the institution, all the while promoting a healthier lifestyle. German Universities are particularly active on this subject. Indeed, several institutions in the biggest cities of the country benefit from mobility programmes implemented by the German company [nextbike](#).

4. Collect furniture & other household items

When their mobility period abroad is over, students move back home usually leaving behind more than just experience and good memories. The array of kitchen appliances, furniture and other household items can be used by the next generation of mobility students. In order to ensure these items don’t go to waste, some HEIs collect and store them until the next group of international students arrives or partner with charity organisations that collect them. At the 2020 CANiE Europe Summit, University College Dublin presented how they were donating furniture, cooking equipment and more, that was left by former students, to incoming students moving in the (student) residences.

5. Provide international students with green guides or handbooks

When international students arrive at their new institution, they receive additional details on the new city and on the institution. Normally, the information covers the transportation system, housing, and other relevant logistical details. HEIs can expand these “welcome packs” by adding information on local sustainable practices/activities, such as flea markets, recycling habits, bulk markets, etc. For instance, the [Green Guide](#) by Ghent University includes all aspects of students’ needs from transport, to food, shopping, waste recycling along with useful tips and resources.

6. Integrating sustainability in the curricula

The topic of sustainability touches almost all areas of knowledge. In order to make substantial change, embedding it in the curricula of an institution can raise awareness on the broad impact this change may have on society, among other benefits. Several teachers have already integrated the focus on sustainability within their courses. This is the case of Sorbonne University, where aspects of sustainability and environmental respect have been added to the course Human Rights and Responsibilities: University Principles and Global Challenges. As a partner of the Erasmus+ “[Green Erasmus](#)” project, SOS-UK, also developed the programme “[Responsible futures](#)” on embedding sustainability in the curricula.

7. Promote, raise awareness and give incentives

Universities are in an excellent position not only to be role models of institutional sustainability but also to raise the awareness of the academic community on the need to undertake more sustainable steps. For example, Ghent University informs its Erasmus students about the existing alternatives of local mobility – i.e. car sharing, bus, train...; while Georgetown University developed a [number of tips](#) for individuals to reduce their carbon footprint. Additionally, we should make the most of the academic community’s vast individual knowledge and take the opportunity to brainstorm with students and staff about the transition to more sustainable HEIs. That is the case of the University of Pavia, which launches a competition each year to collect proposals on green projects to be implemented on campus (CANiE Europe Summit, 2020). Also focusing on a bottom-up approach is an initiative by SOS-UK: an engagement programme for workplaces called “[Green Impact](#)”, which won the UNESCO prize for sustainability in education. Overall, if HEIs are willing and able to take advantage of this potential, they might be surprised by how tremendous the impact of the proposed solutions can have on society.

8. Promote healthy food habits

Small steps can be taken in day-to-day life to help achieve more sustainable living. Taking into consideration that each campus is a small city on its own, the perfect opportunity arises for organisations to promote healthy habits and foster a more sustainable way of living. Simple changes like promoting Meat-free Mondays or providing the campus with water drinking stations will incentivize the whole academic community to have more sustainable habits. For instance, Ghent University has 11 cafeterias and 7 restaurants that provide diverse and healthy food at reasonable prices. They also promote vegetarian food in their menu, thus encouraging the academic community to have more sustainable food choices.

9. International sustainability champions

Having a person or a working group responsible for the sustainable development of an institution is a good practice and it's already being implemented by several HEIs.

The impact of this position is even greater when there is a collaboration among several departments in the institution, allowing for the message, resources or tools to reach as many people as possible/wider audience and thus implement further change overall. According to the College Sustainability Report Card of 2011, in the U.S.A., 75% of the 322 participating schools and colleges had full-time staff dedicated to sustainability initiatives and education.

10. Teamwork makes the dream work

It is essential that we all join forces in the fight against climate change. It is all truer for HEIs since the bureaucratic processes in place might hinder the transition. Partnering with other organisations of the broader society focused on environmental sustainability will certainly stimulate synergies and ensure that best practices are implemented in HEIs strategies. Moreover, the possibility to organise joint activities will boost the number of people reached, as well as play a strategic role in influencing societal change.

Finally, as we have seen, multiple paths are open for HEIs to transition towards a more sustainable internationalisation. What is most important is to act. Little by little, we will be able to achieve better results and aim higher in our goals for sustainable internationalisation. These ten examples, together with many other good practices and useful resources, will be published next summer in the "Handbook for sustainable internationalisation", in the framework of the Erasmus+ "Green Erasmus" project.

If you are interested in this topic and would like to be kept updated on the latest development on the sustainability of the Erasmus+ programme, we invite you to [sign up to our newsletter](#).

The article was inspired by the report compiled by Viktoriya Terzieva (Policy and Research Officer at EUF).

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