



CONTEXT

Over the past 150 years, the concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere has risen to record levels, accounting for an average increase in global temperature of 0.85 °C. In its 2018 special report, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change called on strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, warning governments of the devastating effects that global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels would have on the planet. Should current trends remain unchanged, said scenario would be reached within the next 30 years.

Preventing climate change is one of the key priorities of the European Union (EU). Against the backdrop of the Paris Agreement, the EU has set the target of cutting its GHGs emissions by 20% by 2020 compared with 1990 levels. That figure is expected to rise to 40% by 2030 and to 90% by 2050. This commitment has been reflected in the main EU policies and programmes, such as the Europe 2020 Strategy, which highlights sustainable growth as one of its priorities.

Nonetheless, Erasmus+, one of the EU's main instruments to support growth, jobs, equity and social inclusion, has been slow to include green action in its own functioning. With two thirds of its budget allocated to learning mobility of individuals, Erasmus+ sent around 400,000 students, trainees and staff abroad every year from 2014 till 2020. The success of the programme over the past three decades has prompted the EU to nearly double the budget of the Erasmus programme to EUR 26.2 billion for the years 2021-2027.

While the benefits of spending time abroad for studying, training or teaching are manifold and have been well studied, little attention has been paid to calculating –let alone offsetting– the carbon footprint that is generated by the yearly movement of nearly half a million people across Europe and beyond. With transport being responsible for almost a quarter of all EU GHGs, and flying being the fastest-growing source of transport-related CO₂ emissions in the EU, the need to have the Erasmus programme incorporate environmental principles in its functioning takes on a renewed importance. The Erasmus programme is set to be larger, more inclusive and more ambitious. It can also be a lot greener.