

Sustainable internationalisation for a sustainable Europe



*The role of Higher Education
internationalisation in fostering a more
environmentally friendly continent*

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2 Strategic Partnership project:

Green Erasmus

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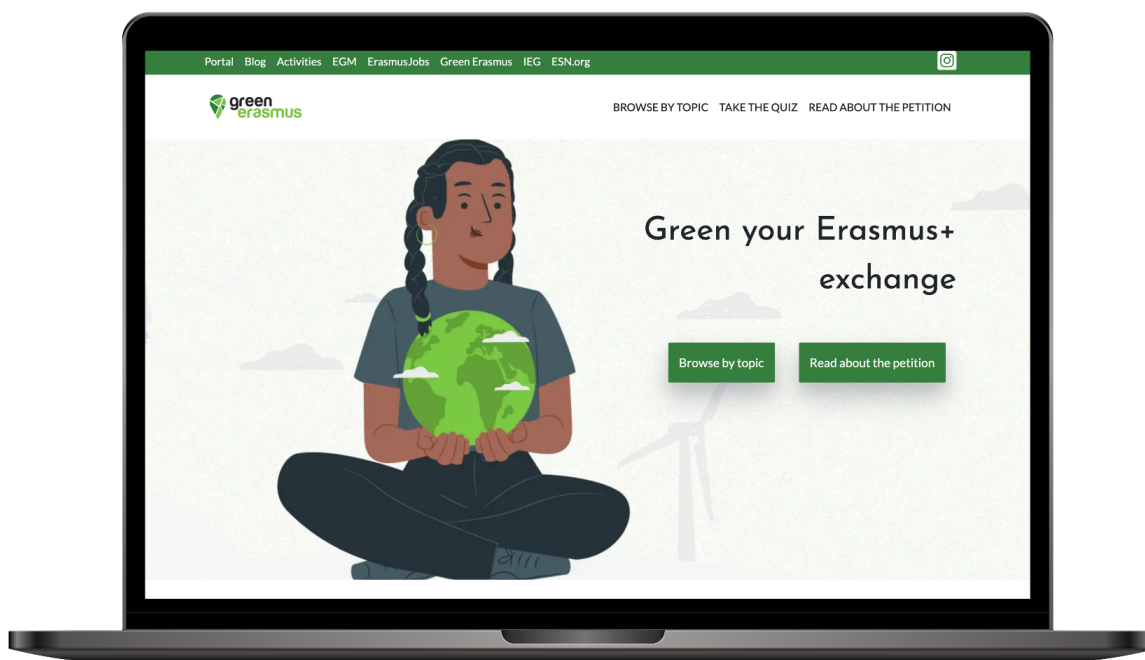
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1. Background

Green Erasmus is an Erasmus+ KA2 project whose main goals are to increase the environmental sustainability of the Erasmus+ programme, while also raising awareness about the importance of more sustainable internationalisation processes. To achieve this, a set of activities on a wide range of topics was carefully planned and implemented to ensure the maximum impact possible.

The first result of project consisted of **research on Erasmus students' habits**¹. An extensive survey, that gathered over 10,000 valid responses from all over Europe, shed light on the habits of students on consumption, daily life, and travel, while also looking at their environmental attitudes and beliefs. The conclusions of this research were reflected in the creation of resources for students to encourage a more sustainable behaviour during all stages of mobility, namely the **Green Erasmus portal**.



Green Erasmus Portal

¹ Diekmann A., Karaiskos G., *Research on the habits of Erasmus students: consumer, daily life, and travel habits of Erasmus students from the perspective of their environmental attitudes and beliefs*, Green Erasmus project, 2022. Retrieved at <https://project.greenerasmus.org/documents/GE-report.pdf>

One of the main conclusions of the research highlighted a major attitude-behaviour gap, in the sense that “...high levels of concern on environmental issues and a sense of responsibility among individuals do not always translate into action...”. Additionally, when exploring their consumption and travel habits in particular, cost/price was deemed as a big limitation in the adoption of a more sustainable lifestyle, impacting students’ choices and decisions. Therefore, most of the students travel by plane to (73%) and from (69%) their Erasmus destination through low-cost companies seeking to benefit from very cheap and convenient air travel compared to greener alternatives that are often more expensive and time-consuming.

Although environmental sustainability is among the priorities of the Erasmus+ programme, the envisaged financial support to travel sustainably - the top-up for green travel², commonly referred to as the green top-up - is clearly insufficient to face the added costs of travelling through sustainable means of transport. The [Green Erasmus petition](#) was launched in Spring 2022 to revamp this instrument by advocating to increase in the green top up to up to 250 euros and up to 7 days support for the round trip. The proposal, which has been signed by over 5000 people, would be an inclusive incentive to encourage green travel, if welcomed. The results of this petition are analysed further below. The petition calls for an increase for support for green travel. Green Erasmus recognises that in the long term, systemic change of our infrastructure is needed to decrease air travel and therefore carbon emissions across Europe including: cheaper train, bus, greener sea travel instead of subsidies on air travel, better high speed train connections across Europe; more integrated train and bus networks throughout Europe including an integrated booking platform, more accessible network fit for purpose for disabled travellers. These changes would all support Europeans to make more sustainable travel choices and are the ultimate goal.

A second **Green Erasmus research** activity aimed to **explore the state of play of sustainable internationalisation practices in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Europe**³, through the analysis of around 150 responses.

² The Top up amount to individual support for green travel is a contribution from the Erasmus+ programme that is attributed in the following conditions: “Students and recent graduates who do not receive the travel support budget category can also opt for green travel. In this case, they will receive a single contribution of 50 EUR as a top-up amount to the individual support and up to 4 days of additional individual support to cover travel days for a return trip, if relevant.” (Retrieved from the Erasmus+ programme guide, version 2 (2023) 21-12-2022 at https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-01/ErasmusplusProgramme-Guide2023-v2_en.pdf)

³ Conclusions of the Green Erasmus survey on sustainable internationalisation in Alves H., Terzieva V., *Handbook for sustainable internationalisation*, Green Erasmus project, 2023. Retrieved at <https://project.greenerasmus.org/documents/GE-handbook-HEIs.pdf>

The research findings were important in understanding the views of staff on topics ranging from sources of information on environmental issues, the role of HEIs in the process of achieving a more environmentally sustainable world, and the inclusion of sustainability in the HEIs strategies, among others. For example, almost 90% of staff either agree or strongly agree that environmental sustainability is something they would like to learn more about. However, only almost half of respondents consider sources and events provided by their HEI to be a main source of information on environmental issues, which highlights an opportunity for HEIs to increase their education role around these. Confirming this is also the answer of more than 75% of staff, who strongly agrees that environmental sustainability is something that universities should actively incorporate and promote. Finally, when it comes to specific environmental sustainability-focused engagement activities/actions HEIs are implementing specifically for international students, 49.35% of respondents selected the option “We are not implementing any specific engagement initiatives/actions for international students”.

Additional good practices and ideas for actions on the International Office side can be found in the [Handbook for sustainable internationalisation](#), which supports HEIs in understanding what can be done to embed environmental sustainability in their internationalisation processes. In the handbook, HEIs’ representatives can find research conclusions on sustainable internationalisation of HEIs across Europe, other resources that can be useful in this process, as well as a [workshop presentation and moderation manual](#) focused on supporting students preparing to go on mobility to understand the impact their choices might have on the environment and how to make more mindful ones.

Given the transformative power international mobility has on students and the fact that students are moving into a different city, the organisation of specific activities for international students might have a bigger influence and better fulfil the specific needs of this target group. Keeping this in mind, the Green Erasmus consortium also worked on [Guidelines for environmental activities during mobility exchange](#), which can provide interesting ideas for youth and student organisations to incorporate sustainability-related activities in their plan.

The conclusions of the two research reports mentioned above and the reflections on the petition served as the basis for the development of these policy recommendations, as they acknowledged that internationalisation of Higher Education can play an important role in supporting the achievement of the sustainability goals of the European Union.

2. Policy recommendations

Further capitalising on the role of sustainable internationalisation to achieve the sustainability goals of the European Union

The internationalisation of European HEIs has been for many years and still is a way to promote the exchange of knowledge and practices, as well as to foster European identity, which has deeply influenced the way the European Union is perceived. The opportunity to undergo a mobility period abroad is an eye-opening experience, as living in a different country and mixing with different nationalities/cultures contributes to a better understanding of how other cultures/countries/regions deal with societal problems, which can then also help to take over good practices and applying them to a different context. With the goals of the European Green Deal influencing all sectors of European life, it is not a surprise that internationalisation of Higher Education has also been impacted. The Erasmus+ programme, a flagship initiative that has shaped European education in the last 35 years, has also focused its efforts on becoming more environmentally sustainable. However, it has not only been through this programme that HEIs have changed their internationalisation practices into more climate-friendly ones. In fact, the urgency of acting on climate change was brought forward many years ago by them, and many Institutions embraced environmental sustainability as one of their core strategic goals well before the programme focused on it. Their role in supporting and encouraging change towards more sustainable practices cannot be ignored.

Overall, the **role of sustainable internationalisation needs to be capitalised further as a means to achieve the sustainability goals of the European Union**. HEIs are an important channel to reach students and share knowledge on this topic, and this is bolstered further by the potential of international mobility to change habits.

In order to enhance this role of internationalisation, there are two areas in which actions should focus on:

- Improving conditions for both students and staff to travel sustainably to and from their mobility destination;
- Increasing the potential to acquire green skills and competencies during a sustainable mobility lifecycle, as well as its recognition.

2.1. The power of sustainable internationalisation to change habits

Sustainable mobility for a sustainable internationalisation

When we talk about internationalisation of Higher Education, Erasmus+ mobility is one of the first initiatives that comes to mind. While it is a great opportunity for students, it also has an impact on the environment - an assessment of the CO₂ footprint of Erasmus+ KA103 mobilities from 2014 to 2020 concluded that it reached a total of 409,914 CO₂ eq. tonnes⁴.

However, Erasmus+ mobility also requires major changes in participants' lives, which can trigger a change of habits. Leveraging the Erasmus experience to promote more sustainable habits incentivises a shift that can have a lasting impact in participants' lives. The first step to accomplish this would thus be to work on the attitude-behaviour gap of students, by enabling and encouraging students and staff to travel sustainably to their mobility destination, supporting them to experience slow travel and to enjoy everything Europe has to offer along the way. Still, there are several factors that can hinder that change. Through these recommendations, we will explore ways to mitigate them.

2.1.1. Revamp the green top-up

The top up amount to individual support for green travel, commonly known as the 'green top-up', was launched in the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027 and it was a welcomed initiative designed to enable students to opt for green travel. However, its implementation is constraint by several factors:

- The limited amount available (50 EUR at the time of writing this report) is not enough to face the additional costs of travelling sustainably throughout Europe. The European Commission argues that the travel costs for a typical Erasmus student are already included in their monthly grant, and therefore this would be only a complement. However, research conducted in the past consistently states that the Erasmus grant is not enough to cover the costs students face while on mobility, let alone covering that plus a more sustainable journey. Therefore, even though it is a

⁴ Gabrielczak P., Sokołowicz E., The carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020, in Assessment of the transport-related carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ Programme, Erasmus Goes Green project, 2021 (retrieved at https://www.egg-project-eu.uvsq.fr/medias/fichier/egg-final-io1-report-v2-2-1-1-1663939566314-pdf?ID_FICHE=243029&INLINE=FALSE)

step in the right direction, the green top-up as it is, puts the burden on students to make the decision and bear the costs.

- The burdening requirements to confirm that a student travelled sustainably, which in certain cases demands that the home Institutions sign a declaration stating that the student travelled sustainably besides requesting the sustainable journey tickets.

Even though some of these issues have started to be addressed, there is scope for further improvement. If we aim to encourage more students to travel sustainably, it is essential to increase the green top-up amount to adjust it to the actual costs of a sustainable trip throughout Europe and making sure the majority of students can afford to travel sustainably. Additionally, we also recommend streamlining the implementation for HEIs, for example requiring only the collection of supporting documents and/or a signed declaration from the student.

2.1.2. Support more sustainable business travel within Erasmus+

In the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020, staff mobility accounted for 19% of the total number of Key Action 1 (KA1) mobilities in Higher Education⁵. In the new Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027, support for green travel was included for Higher Education staff mobilities under KA1, for distances below 4,000 km.

Further to this, the participation in projects developed under Key Action 2 also requires regular travel of those involved, be it for project meetings, conferences, and other events.

Even though one of the horizontal priorities of Erasmus+ focuses on including environmental sustainability in all aspects of the programme, the choice of travelling sustainably seems to be more dependent on the institutional policies for business trips. It is thus up to the Higher

⁵ Gabrielczak P., Sokołowicz E., The carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020, in Assessment of the transport-related carbon footprint of the Erasmus+ Programme, Erasmus Goes Green project, 2021 (retrieved at https://www.egg-project-eu.uvsq.fr/medias/fichier/egg-final-io1-report-v2-2-1-1-1663939566314-pdf?ID_FICHE=243029&INLINE=FALSE)

Education Institutions to promote sustainable travel and/or encourage the reduction of the number of trips done by staff. This can lead to quite distinct realities for staff across Europe.

Given the important role of staff in inspiring and encouraging students to go on mobility, and the way they can serve as examples for them, we believe the promotion of sustainable travel for staff should come from every front possible, including the Erasmus+ programme as well.

In addition to the green top-up currently available for them, we advocate for the following measures to be adopted:

- Requiring combining different events and meetings within KA2 projects to make the most out of the time and CO2 footprint involved with travelling.
- Reducing the number of travellers not travelling through sustainable means of transport whenever possible, depending on the type of project.

2.2. The improvement of environmental sustainability skills and competences as a goal of the EU Higher Education sector

In 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted a recommendation to stimulate learning for the green transition⁶, including providing learning opportunities in formal, non-formal and informal settings. In the same year, the European Commission launched the policy action of developing a European sustainability competence framework, as part of the European Green Deal initiative. The [GreenComp competence framework](#) consists of four interrelated areas, categorising different sustainability competences, forming a total number of 12. The creation of GreenComp Framework was a big step towards the shift in mindset and behaviour of European society.

⁶ EU Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality (retrieved at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9107-2022-INIT/en/pdf>)

AREA	COMPETENCE	DESCRIPTOR
1. <i>Embodying sustainability values</i>	1.1 Valuing sustainability	To reflect on personal values; identify and explain how values vary among people and over time, while critically evaluating how they align with sustainability values.
	1.2 Supporting fairness	To support equity and justice for current and future generations and learn from previous generations for sustainability.
	1.3 Promoting nature	To acknowledge that humans are part of nature; and to respect the needs and rights of other species and of nature itself in order to restore and regenerate healthy and resilient ecosystems.
2. <i>Embracing complexity in sustainability</i>	2.1 Systems thinking	To approach a sustainability problem from all sides; to consider time, space and context in order to understand how elements interact within and between systems.
	2.2 Critical thinking	To assess information and arguments, identify assumptions, challenge the status quo, and reflect on how personal, social and cultural backgrounds influence thinking and conclusions.
	2.3 Problem framing	To formulate current or potential challenges as a sustainability problem in terms of difficulty, people involved, time and geographical scope, in order to identify suitable approaches to anticipating and preventing problems, and to mitigating and adapting to already existing problems.

AREA	COMPETENCE	DESCRIPTOR
3. <i>Envisioning sustainable futures</i>	3.1 Futures literacy	To envision alternative sustainable futures by imagining and developing alternative scenarios and identifying the steps needed to achieve a preferred sustainable future.
	3.2 Adaptability	To manage transitions and challenges in complex sustainability situations and make decisions related to the future in the face of uncertainty, ambiguity and risk.
	3.3 Exploratory thinking	To adopt a relational way of thinking by exploring and linking different disciplines, using creativity and experimentation with novel ideas or methods.
4. <i>Acting for sustainability</i>	4.1 Political agency	To navigate the political system, identify political responsibility and accountability for unsustainable behaviour, and demand effective policies for sustainability.
	4.2 Collective action	To act for change in collaboration with others.
	4.3 Individual initiative	To identify own potential for sustainability and to actively contribute to improving prospects for the community and the planet.

Figure 1 - GreenComp areas, competences and descriptors (retrieved from GreenComp - The European sustainability competence framework at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128040>)⁷

⁷ Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U., Cabrera Giraldez, M. GreenComp – The European sustainability competence framework. Bacigalupo, M., Punie, Y. (editors), EUR 30955 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022; ISBN 978-92-76-46485-3, doi:10.2760/13286, JRC128040.

To ensure that learning for environmental sustainability is a systemic feature of policy and practice in the EU, the whole educational system needs to adapt and reinforce this possibility, and Higher Education in general (and internationalisation in particular) plays an important role in this process.

Since Higher Education cooperation within Europe is quite influenced by Erasmus+, we believe the programme needs to step up its game and encourage the learning opportunities that can be potentiated through its activities. In fact, the transformative learning potential of an Erasmus+ learning mobility can be a great way to involve students without a sustainability background in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This can be done through the inclusion of new, more innovative pedagogies that are relevant to support the development of sustainability competences, developed in further detail in the Green Erasmus report “Higher Education on the journey towards Sustainable Development in curricula”.

The following recommendations could be considered in the path to achieve this.

2.2.1. Update the ECHE monitoring to require a professional competence framework for International Relations Officers (IROs) which includes training on environmental sustainability

The Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) provides the quality framework for any activity developed within the Erasmus+ programme. The award of an ECHE is a prerequisite for any Higher Education Institution from a programme country to participate in Erasmus+ activities.

When looking closely at the commitments each institution pledges to undertake, environmental sustainability is briefly mentioned through the agreement to implement the priorities of the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027 “*By promoting environmentally friendly practices in all activities related to the Programme*”⁸. Even though this is an important step that ensures all activities being organised take environmental sustainability into consideration, its

⁸ ECHE certificate template retrieved at https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/Erasmus-ECHE-certificat_vert-EN.pdf

vagueness might translate into completely different efforts undertaken by European HEIs, leading to a wide range of results and potentially lower impact.

To trigger a more thorough and consistent impact in the implementation of Erasmus+ and in the standard practices of institutions, we advocate for the inclusion of specific requirements in the ECHE monitoring regarding a professional competence framework for IROs that includes training on environmental sustainability.

A good reference point would be the existing Framework of Erasmus+ Staff Competencies, created in the context of [FESC](#), an Erasmus+ project which defined relevant quality criteria for staff members working with student mobility. The FESC framework could be updated to include environmental sustainability aspects and thus, ensure that staff would acquire concrete knowledge in sustainability-related topics and improve their skills, while also being more aware of the impact their actions have on the environment.

This goes in line with the views of staff, as almost 90% of the respondents of the Green Erasmus survey either agreed or strongly agreed that environmental sustainability is something they would like to learn more about⁹.

2.2.2. Encourage HEIs to include sustainability-related activities in their mobility preparation for students

One of the conclusions of the Green Erasmus research on the habits of Erasmus students identified a major attitude-behaviour gap, as “...high levels of concern on environmental issues... do not always translate into action...”. When considering a more sustainable internationalisation process for HEIs, student mobility is one of the key components and therefore reducing this gap would be essential.

According to Dolnicar S. (2020), “...the kind of interventions that have the potential to change behaviour (...) fall into four areas: leveraging people’s beliefs, leveraging people’s social norms, increasing pleasure or instant utility, and altering choice architecture.”. These areas could be taken forward by HEIs through a range of actions, such as the Green Erasmus workshop “Mobility and sustainability: How sustainable will your Erasmus experience be?”.

⁹ Terzieva, V. (2021) “Sustainable Internationalisation at Higher Education Institutions”, Green Erasmus. Retrieved at https://uni-foundation.eu/uploads/2021_GE_Staff_Survey_Report.pdf

which is designed for students preparing to go abroad. During this workshop, they will explore the impact of their actions on the environment and how they can engage in more sustainable behaviour when abroad. The [full presentation](#) and the [guidelines for moderation](#) are freely available to all HEI staff, which enables easy implementation by International Offices. Its short duration of 1.5/2h also encourages its integration with existing events such as info sessions for students preparing their mobility, etc.

We therefore advocate for an encouragement of HEIs to include sustainability-related activities in the standard mobility preparation process for students. This could be done through including specific requirements regarding these activities in the Organisational support general requirements.

2.2.3. Promote the recognition of the learning experience gained throughout a sustainable mobility lifecycle

While travelling sustainably to and from an Erasmus+ mobility can be a quite rewarding experience, it is undeniable that it involves a substantial effort from students. Besides that, the involvement in sustainability-related activities organised by the home or host HEI complements the formal learning opportunity of Erasmus+ mobility. These efforts can be considered as a non-formal learning experience in itself, apart from the academic one embedded in a learning mobility.

To enhance the attractiveness and motivation to act more sustainably throughout the mobility, we advocate for the assessment of the learning outcomes of a sustainable mobility lifecycle¹⁰ and its recognition in the diploma supplement of students that commit to implementing it.

¹⁰ A mobility lifecycle refers to all the phases involving mobility: before (including seeking information, applying for mobility and the pre-departure period), during (the whole period spent in the host city/country) and after mobility (returning to the home HEI, including the recognition of the mobility period and restitution to the community).

This could be a step forward to mark an Erasmus+ mobility as a moment in which students become better equipped to face environmental challenges and eventually develop a range of skills that could help their employability in the future.

Students who have their sustainable mobility experience acknowledged could also be encouraged to share their experience with other students preparing to go abroad, to bolster the multiplier effect of the initiative.

2.2.4. Making international student mobility more intertwined with acting on environmental sustainability by promoting the collaboration between HEIs, student organisations and NGOs working on environmental sustainability

According to the XVI edition of the ESN survey “Understanding the experience and needs of exchange students in challenging times”¹¹, which gathered answers from more than 10,000 students, almost half of the respondents did not feel integrated with the local community while on mobility. This is an issue that can hinder Erasmus+ participants to fully experience their international mobility. On the other hand, the same report mentions that less than 8% of students volunteer during their exchanges.

We believe there is untapped potential in students volunteering with NGOs working in the field of environmental sustainability. This would ensure that students have a more complete experience while abroad through connecting with local communities, while also ensuring they learn about how other countries deal with environmental challenges. Therefore, a stronger collaboration between HEIs, student organisations and these NGOs should be fostered and encouraged.

¹¹ Erasmus Student Network (2022). *Understanding the experience and needs of exchange students in challenging times. ESNsurvey - XIV edition*. Retrieved at: <https://esn.org/esnsurvey/2021>

The networks created while on mobility could also be reinforced after the mobility period, allowing students the opportunity to continue the collaboration by undertaking a volunteering period through the European Voluntary Corps, or even an Erasmus+ internship if the opportunity arises.

The [Green Erasmus Guidelines for Environmental Activities](#) can support the development of this collaboration by already providing concrete suggestions of environmentally-related activities that can be organised. To promote the acquisition of skills and competences, each of these activities includes the learning outcomes both for participants and for the organisers.

3. Conclusion

It is undeniable that promoting changes in the Erasmus+ programme for it to become more environmentally sustainable will have a long lasting effect on the Higher Education community, ultimately impacting the achievement of the European Union sustainability goals. This is not only because Erasmus+ is an EU flagship initiative, but also because it can have a concrete role in improving habits and skills of students throughout Europe, as highlighted above.

However, it is also important to recognise that this change needs to be accompanied by concrete policies that encourage a change of behaviour on their own. Substantial changes in the transport infrastructure at European level need to happen to truly encourage Europeans to travel green. Ideally, travelling sustainably throughout Europe would not represent an extra effort undertaken due to the threat of climate change and the need to act, it would be the obvious choice both in terms of price and travelling experience, as it would allow travellers to experience the best Europe has to offer.

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Annex 1: Petition results

The Green Erasmus petition was promoted between June 2022 and June 2023 and received 5257 signatures in total. The tables below show in more detail who signed the petition:

Table 1 Petition signatories by stakeholder type	
Stakeholder	Number of signatories
Student	3999
Working in the higher education sector	724
Other	389
Working elsewhere in the education sector	155

Table 2 Petition signatories by country (all countries with 100+ signatories)	
Country	Number of signatories
Germany	822
Italy	524
Belgium	434
France	381
Spain	361
Czechia	276
Netherlands	268
Portugal	212
Poland	187
Greece	166
Hungary	146
Austria	143
Romania	136
Turkey	106