Tools and Guidelines for Sustainable Student Mobility

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The increasing international mobility of students poses significant challenges to sustainability efforts due to the environmental impact of travel and daily activities. In response, universities and stakeholders are increasingly emphasizing environmentally friendly practices to reduce the carbon footprint of students studying abroad. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the available tools, initiatives and guidelines to promote sustainable behaviours of students participating in international mobility programs. Through a structured review of available literature, guidance and case study analysis, this paper identifies existing resource gaps and highlights best practices for promoting environmentally sustainable behaviours. The findings highlight the need for a user-friendly benchmarking tool that integrates different dimensions of sustainability, including transportation, energy consumption, waste management and community engagement. This study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable student mobility and is a foundation for developers of a useful tool to drive meaningful environmental change in higher education.

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1 Introduction

Educational migration has increased substantially in recent years (Lipura & Collins, 2020), and despite the significant disruptions caused by the pandemic (Yıldırım et al., 2021), it continues to be a significant driver of cross-border collaboration, cultural exchange, and knowledge-sharing for younger generations (Lopes et al., 2024). As students begin their educational journeys, which often include periods of study abroad or student mobility, it is increasingly important to consider the environmental impact of their lifestyle choices (McCollum, & Nicholson, 2022).

International student mobility (ISM) plays an important role in higher education (HE) in two main ways: it promotes cultural exchange between countries and encourages academic collaboration across international borders. However, ISM also raises concerns about sustainability, especially regarding the carbon footprint generated by international travel and the daily activities of mobile students (Gümüş et al., 2020). Therefore, universities should adopt proactive measures to address these environmental impacts related to ISM (Shields & Lu, 2024).

Universities have a unique opportunity to foster sustainable practices among their student communities, setting an example for society (Popescu, 2019). Universities foster sustainable activities and promote sustainable behaviour by the faculty and students in their local environment (Achoura et al., 2024; Qi et al., n.d.). However, when students or staff participate in exchange programs at other institutions, they are most likely unfamiliar with local lifestyles and cannot maintain their preferred sustainable habits.

Higher focus on sustainability challenges higher education institutions (HEIs) to include different tools and guidelines in their practices to promote environmentally responsible behaviours among their students. The present study examines contemporary strategies and resources that encourage sustainable practices among students engaged in international mobility, reviews existing literature and evaluates current practices to synthesise the available knowledge in this area. As such, the paper provides a foundation for developing a practical tool within the SuMoS Erasmus+ project that empowers students to make environmentally conscious decisions during their time abroad.

2 Literature review

Adopting pro-environmental behaviours among university students can be influenced by cultural background, social norms, and institutional support (Akhtar et al., 2022; Kim, 2024). Research from Rumbley (2020) indicates that international students tend to have a higher average carbon footprint than domestic students, primarily due to travel-related emissions. For instance, a study from McCollum, & Nicholson (2022) revealed that international students' travel contributes significantly to their overall greenhouse gas emissions. HEIs can promote their sustainable activities to international students on mobility through various options. The International Education Sustainability Group (IESG) has developed the Climate Action Barometer, a tool enabling institutions to measure and reduce their climate impacts on international student mobility. The tool relies on self-reporting from participating institutions and enables them to benchmark their performance against an index of key metrics related to sustainability efforts in international education (ICEF, 2023).

2.1 Student mobility and environmental impact

The United Nations (2025) states that transportation and mobility are central to sustainable development. Moreover, transportation is recognised as a primary concern within student mobility. Students, staff, and visitors commuting to and from campus significantly impact the environment. Research by McCollum, & Nicholson (2022) found that international students emit approximately 7.17 tonnes of CO_2 per year, significantly more than the 4.63 tonnes emitted by domestic students. This difference is primarily due to the long-distance flights home during breaks, while international students typically rely on public transportation for their daily commutes. A study conducted at a Spanish university revealed that most long-distance journeys were made using public transport, suggesting that students are open to adopting more sustainable modes of transportation (Cruz-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

2.2 Sustainable transport options for students

According to the European Environment Agency (European Commission, Directorate General for Climate Action, 2025), passenger cars are responsible for approximately 16% of the total emissions of CO_2 in the EU. The Sustainable Mobility for All platform (SuM4All, 2021) provides detailed reports on sustainable personal transport in individual countries. The present study focuses on the partner countries involved in the Erasmus+ SuMoS project: Croatia, France, Serbia, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia. Table 1 provides an overview of the sustainable mobility rankings in the countries under consideration.

Table 1: Sustainable mobility ranking

Country	Overall ranking #	Index	Strengths	Weaknesses
France	7	81.4	Extensive rail network	Urban air pollution
Slovak Republic	33	63.7	Railroad density, increasing passenger rail usage	Limited air transport connectivity
Slovenia	38	61.3	Effective port and road connectivity	High transport-related CO_2 emissions per capita
Croatia	40	60.8	Exceptional rural access and road connectivity index	High dependency on road transport
Serbia	47	57.1	Efficient road transport	Poor quality of railroads

Source: (SuM4All, 2021)

In addition to limited sustainable mobility options available in the countries under consideration, the recent pandemic resulted in a radical shift from public to private transport modes (Das et al., 2021). Nevertheless, 64% of Europeans are willing to use public transport for environmental purposes (European Investment Bank, 2025). In addition, Europe is expected to witness significant growth in its Public Transportation market in the coming years (Statista, 2025). The EU Green Deal (European Commission, 2021) aims to achieve sustainable transport by prioritising users' needs and providing them with more affordable, accessible, healthier and cleaner alternatives to their current mobility habits.

In addition to considerations of personal mobility in general, it is imperative to address sustainability in the context of student mobility, as mobile students' transportation decisions substantially impact carbon emissions and resource consumption. Integrating sustainability into mobility practices is, therefore, not only aligned with global climate objectives but also equips future generations with environmentally sound habits. Therefore, it is recommended that public transport and low-emission travel options be promoted to foster green mobility practices among students and contribute to broader institutional sustainability goals.

2.3 Beyond Travel Sustainable Living Practices for International Students

A range of sustainable activities are available for ISM students, extending beyond transportation, including:

- *Waste Reduction and Recycling:* International students frequently encounter difficulties adapting to local waste management systems due to their unfamiliarity with recycling practices (Beltran et al., 2022). McCollum & Nicholson (2022) emphasise the role of universities in providing clear guidance on local recycling programs and waste reduction strategies.
- *Energy Conservation*: Energy use in student accommodations is another significant aspect of promoting sustainability. According to McCollum, & Nicholson (2022), international students are not showing high level of energy-saving behaviours due to a lack of awareness or differing cultural norms regarding energy conservation.
- *Sustainable food choices*: Research indicates that international students may increase their consumption of processed or imported foods due to unfamiliarity with local cuisines or limited access to fresh produce (McCollum, & Nicholson, 2022). However, they tend to maintain their sustainable eating and community values abroad (Nemeth et al., 2019).

However, international students may have limited information about sustainable practices in their host country. This lack of awareness hinders their engagement in more environmentally friendly behaviours while studying abroad (Diekmann & Karaiskos, 2022).

3 Methodology

This study aims to identify, analyse and synthesise existing tools, initiatives, and guidelines for promoting sustainable practices in ISM. The objective is to establish a foundation for developing a benchmarking tool that supports environmentally conscious decision-making among students. A review of relevant policy documents, projects, reports and tools was conducted to explore existing initiatives related to green practices in ISM. The existing digital tools, including the Green Erasmus Portal, the Personal Ecological Footprint Calculator, and the CO_2 Visualization Tool from Erasmus Goes Green, were analysed to evaluate their features, usability, and effectiveness. The analysis focused on identifying these tools' main features and usage to inform the design of a benchmarking tool within the SuMoS project.

4 Erasmus programme and green initiatives in the EU

The Erasmus+ is the EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. As such, the programme fosters international mobility and cultural exchange among students, educators, and institutions across Europe. The programme's fundamental objective is to promote education, inclusivity and sustainable practices (European Commission, 2025a). In alignment with the objectives of the Erasmus Student Network[1], the Erasmus+ EU programme[2] provides funding and facilitates international mobility and collaboration. Erasmus+ is one of several European initiatives promoting sustainable practices, as evidenced by the term "green" appearing in the 2024 and 2025 Erasmus+ guides, appearing 146 and 149 times, respectively (European Commission, 2024a, 2025b).

The Green Erasmus Report on the Habits of Erasmus Students (Diekmann & Karaiskos, 2022) highlights key findings about the environmental behaviours of Erasmus students. Most students (81.7%) travel internationally during their mobility, often by plane, contributing significantly to carbon emissions. The study stresses the crucial role of beliefs, attitudes, and social norms in shaping students' environmental behaviours. Although many students express environmental concerns, their actions are often not aligned with sustainable practices. This problem is made worse by a

[1] https://www.esn.org/
[2] https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/

lack of understanding of sustainable practices in their host countries, which makes it harder for them to act in an environmentally responsible way.

Both the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps[3] programmes have been instrumental in promoting sustainability among young people. To this end, a document has been published which provides an overview of activities in both programmes that contribute to the green transition (European Commission, 2024b). The promotion of environmentally friendly behaviour is facilitated by several initiatives and guidelines within the Erasmus programme, owing to issues that have been identified. For instance, the Green Travel Top-Up initiative offers supplementary financial assistance to students opting for sustainable modes of transportation, such as trains or buses, to reach their Erasmus destination. Furthermore, students may receive up to four days of additional individual support to accommodate extended travel times (Erasmus Student Network, 2025). A range of guidelines are also available for students. The Handbook for Sustainable Internationalisation offers guidelines for HEI and students on integrating sustainability into international mobility practices, including travel recommendations and strategies to reduce carbon emissions (Green Erasmus, 2025). The Erasmus Goes Green[4] project has issued policy recommendations to reduce the programme's environmental impact, advocating for measures such as increased support for green travel options and implementing sustainable practices across all levels of the Erasmus+ programme (Alves & Terzieva, 2022).

Two ongoing Erasmus+ projects promoting environmentally sustainable behaviour among students during mobility have been identified. The Erasmus+ SET project (Sustainable Erasmus+ Travel) aims to enhance students' opportunities to adopt more environmentally sustainable habits during their mobility and to change how they think about the trip to the mobility destination. The gamified version of the Green Skills repository is available to discover the competencies that can be acquired when travelling greenly to a mobility destination (Dermati, 2024). The Erasmus+ SuMoS project (Strengthening the Ecosystem for Sustainable Student Mobility) aims to promote sustainable practices among students participating in international mobility programs by developing tools and resources that encourage environmentally friendly behaviours during their studies abroad.

[3] https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity_en
[4] https://esn.org/erasmus-goes-green

Several other initiatives and guidelines are available in addition to the Erasmus initiatives. The European Association for International Education (EAIE, 2025) provides some recommendations on how student learning can drive sustainable study abroad. Moreover, UNESCO (2024) has issued guidance on the incorporation of sustainability principles into academic curricula, to achieve a 90% adoption rate of green national curricula by 2030. The expected learning outcomes for each age group, including the 18+ age group, have been delineated.

5 Digital tools for promoting sustainability in ISM

Various tools and resources are available online to encourage students to adopt environmentally friendly and sustainable practices during their international mobility experiences.

The Green Erasmus[5] portal is an excellent example of such a resource. It provides helpful materials to support students in adopting sustainable practices before, during, and after their time abroad. This portal includes educational resources, fun interactive games, and quizzes to increase students' awareness of environmental issues (Green Erasmus, 2025).

5.1 Overview of existing web applications and portals

The Ecological Footprint webpage[6] comprises several footprint calculators, among them the Personal Ecological Footprint, which would be the most appropriate for students (Graz University of Technology, Institute of Process and Particle Engineering, 2025). The footprint is calculated using the Sustainable Process Index methodology (Narodoslawsky & Krotscheck, 1995). The Personal Ecological Footprint calculator requires substantial user input, including general information about the individual and details regarding environmentally related training, housing, mobility and food. Specifically, values are required when reporting on housing and mobility. Lifestyle habits are also included. The result of this calculator is the personal ecological footprint compared to the available area in the selected country and the average footprint per person in Austria.

[5] https://www.greenerasmus.org/
[6] https://www.fussabdrucksrechner.at/en/calculation/personal/5

The CO_2 Visualization Tool, developed within the Erasmus Goes Green project (Erasmus Goes Green, 2022) calculates the carbon footprint for different travel options, enabling informed decisions that minimize environmental impact. The tool is similar to the Personal Ecological Footprint Calculator in that it requires a significant amount of input from students regarding their housing, various types of transport, and secondary carbon footprint factors, along with consumption estimations in different categories. The personal footprint is subsequently calculated based on the values entered by the user.

The LifeStyle Test[7] application was developed by the Finnish Innovation Fund (PSLifestyle, 2025) and provides an evaluation of the impact of lifestyle choices on environmental footprint. Rather than providing specific values, the app utilizes a descriptive multiple-choice format for each question. The user-friendly interface has multilingual capabilities and a comprehensive approach to sustainable behaviour. The test results are presented as a personal carbon footprint, alongside a proposed target for 2030. The test results in the provision of personalised recommendations for sustainable behaviour. The user can accept or reject the proposed activity or mark it as already doing this. The selection is reflected in the updated results of the carbon footprint calculator, which typically show lower CO_2 emissions.

Despite the U-Mob Life project (U-MOB LIFE, 2018) promoting the CO_2 emission tool as one of their deliverables, it is currently not operational. The survey on mobility is available in a document format, including some general suggestions, mainly to support institutional sustainability.

5.2 Analysis of Website Traffic or Environmental Footprint Calculators

The website traffic analysis for the three selected environmental footprint calculators employed the Similarweb[8] tool and produced interesting results. While the Personal Ecological Footprint (Graz University of Technology, Institute of Process and Particle Engineering, 2025) recorded 772 identified monthly visits in December 2024, the Lifestyle test app (PSLifestyle, 2025) received 13,275 visits. Conversely, the Erasmus Goes Green tool website recorded no traffic in December 2024. The average visit duration on the former is marginally less than two minutes. In

[7] https://www.lifestyletest.eu/
[8] https://www.similarweb.com/

comparison, the average visit duration on the latter is more than five minutes, indicating a higher level of interest. Furthermore, the bounce rate (the percentage of users viewing only one page before leaving the website) stands at 42% for the Personal Ecological Footprint website and 19% for the Lifestyle test app. This concise analysis provides a preliminary evaluation of the tool's usability and provides the basis for the development of a benchmarking tool for mobile student's environmental footprint within the SuMoS project.

6 Discussion and conclusions

Student mobility is an important aspect of higher education, fostering the development of future problem-solvers, and providing a physical space for observation, debate and networking (EAIE, 2025). As Alves (2021) emphasizes, HEIs should adopt measuring methods to help them better understand the impact of their internationalisation-related emissions. Providing supplementary information on local sustainable practices and activities, including flea markets, recycling habits, and bulk markets, would also benefit their incoming students. For instance, the Green Guide by Ghent University (2025) comprehensively addresses all aspects of students' needs, including transport, food, shopping, and waste recycling, along with valuable tips and resources.

The Green Erasmus Report (Diekmann & Karaiskos, 2022) emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to make international student mobility more sustainable. Therefore, the availability of specially designed, user-friendly web applications would be most valuable for both outgoing and incoming students. While most sustainable international mobility initiatives are centred on sustainable transport, the web application should encompass additional aspects, such as sustainable food consumption, waste reduction, and related areas. It is acknowledged that specific existing tools are overly complex for students with limited knowledge of their energy consumption habits, public transport distances, etc. In contrast, other tools require search engine optimisation to facilitate enhanced accessibility.

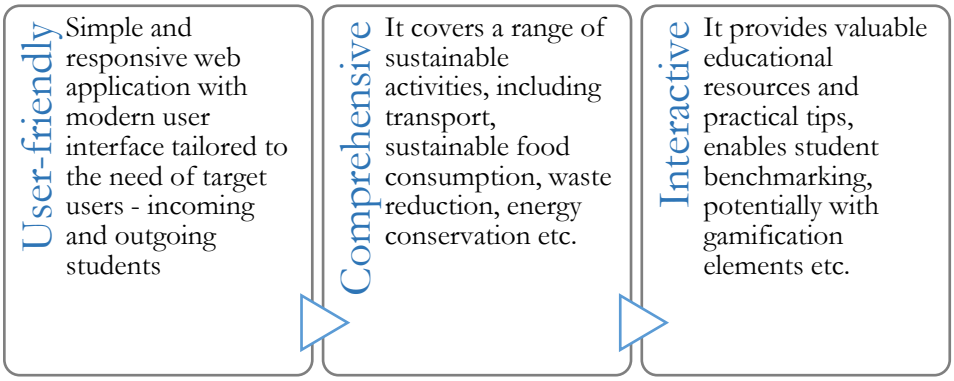

Figure 1: Characteristics of practical and useful digital tool for enhancing student environmental awareness

Source: Own

The analysis of existing tools shows limited usage; therefore, additional effort is needed to develop a user-friendly and practical application for enhancing student environmental awareness, with the characteristics as summarized in Figure 1.

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