



Students

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Student life: service, responsibility, and hope as dimensions of knowledge

Community at Universidade Católica Portuguesa is not introduced to students as an abstract principle. It is encountered gradually, through everyday proximity and shared effort. It emerges in classrooms, hallways, welcome weeks, libraries, laboratories, student associations and volunteering projects. Over time, these spaces connect. What students come to recognise is not a single, unified identity, but a community of communities: overlapping, diverse, and sustained less by formal structures than by active involvement.

Across its campuses in Lisbon, Porto, Braga, and Viseu, Católica brings together students from a wide range of academic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Nursing students volunteer regularly with *Comunidade Vida e Paz*, while medical students participate in initiatives such as *VIDA* and *Missão País*, which have become reference points for student-led service in Portugal. Communication students engage at *HeForShe UCP* promoting gender equality, Law students prepare for moot court competitions, and Psychology students develop mental health podcasts that circulate beyond the university. Business and Economics students contribute to Católica Consulting projects supporting social enterprises; Arts students collaborate with *Refood*, a national food redistribution movement; Dentistry students sit on Pedagogical Councils, taking part in decisions that shape their own academic programmes. These activities are not exclusive to neither of these courses, they are peripheral. For many students, they are among the clearest expressions of what it means to belong to the university.

This sense of belonging is reinforced by a dense ecosystem of

student-led structures. Debating societies train students in British Parliamentary and Model United Nations formats, fostering habits of argumentation, listening, and negotiation that extend beyond competition settings. The student associations produce podcasts, magazines, and large-scale events with corporate partners, offering early exposure to professional environments. Film clubs operate across campuses, creating shared cultural reference points, while the *tunas* (Portuguese traditional academic musical groups wearing black capes) maintain a visible continuity between historical academic life and contemporary student identity. Sports teams compete nationally through FADU championships, and quieter initiatives such as book clubs and language tandems create spaces for sustained, informal exchange. Together, these communities form an environment in which education is understood as something practiced collectively, rather than accumulated individually.

At the Medical School, this dynamic is particularly visible. As a young faculty developed in partnership with Grupo Luz Saúde and Maastricht University in 2021, it does not rely on long-established traditions. Students experience this not as a lack, but as an invitation. There is a shared awareness that institutional culture and community must be built deliberately. This has translated into strong student initiatives, including the creation of an active student association, academic societies, sports clubs, diversity club, academic tuna and catholic students club.

The communities formed during these years extend well beyond graduation. *Alumni* return as mentors, lecturers, supervisors, or employers, reinforcing a sense of continuity that students recognise early on. Collaboration is therefore not merely pragmatic; it is relational, shaped by the understanding that academic and professional paths will intersect again. Studying at Católica is often experienced as entering a long-term network rather than a temporary institutional affiliation.

Community at Católica is not idealised. It includes pressure, uncertainty, and failure. Late nights in libraries, demanding oral examinations, and the first encounters with professional responsibility are common experiences across faculties. What distinguishes the student environment is not the absence of difficulty, but the realization that challenges are navigated together. Study groups form organically, peer mentoring develops informally, and support is offered as part of everyday student life rather than as an exception. Difficulty, in this sense, becomes formative rather than isolating.

Students are also acutely aware of the broader social context in which they study. Católica's refugee scholarship programme, recognised by UNHCR as a global good practice, is not perceived as a distant institutional policy, but as a visible presence in classrooms and student organisations. Students who arrive through these pathways participate fully in academic and social life, shaping daily interactions and reinforcing a shared understanding that access to education carries ethical weight. This contributes to a widespread student perception that studying at Católica involves responsibility toward society, not only personal advancement.

For many students, ethical formation is inseparable from academic training. While the university's Catholic identity is never imposed, it informs an environment in which questions of dignity, care, and responsibility are taken seriously. This is particularly tangible in health-related degrees, where students are consistently reminded that technical competence without human awareness is insufficient. When Pope Francis visited the university, his call for students to become "entrepreneurs of dreams rather than managers of fears" resonated because it articulated values already present in student life: service, responsibility, and hope as dimensions of knowledge.

From a student perspective, studying at Universidade Católica Portuguesa therefore means learning how to cohabit shared spaces, how to assume responsibility before being fully qualified, and how to contribute to communities that extend beyond one's own discipline. What shall remain after graduation is not only academic knowledge, but the experience of having learned within and helped sustain a community that is yours for life.

To future students who may one day read this: choosing Universidade Católica Portuguesa is not simply a matter of selecting a degree programme. It is an entry into a network of relationships that will challenge you, support you, and quietly shape who you become. You will encounter communities already in motion, and you will be invited to create new ones in turn. Bring curiosity, bring doubt, and bring a willingness to learn from others. There is space here for growth and friendship, for responsibility and service. And long after classes have ended, many students come to realise that what endured was not only what they studied, but who they studied with – and how, together, they learned to build something meaningful.

References

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