



International Students

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Community, Communities: A Journey of Knowledge, Belonging, and Transformation

Universities are often described as places of learning, but for many international students they become something deeper: a home of communities, layered and interconnected, where knowledge and human experience merge. My own journey, from Iran to Portugal, and specifically to Universidade Católica Portuguesa, has shown me that community is not a fixed space, but an evolving landscape shaped by culture, belonging, academic purpose, and shared transformation. Living in Portugal for six years, studying and researching at UCP for the past three, I have learned that community is built not only through social integration but also through the empowering act of participating in knowledge creation. In this sense, my path reflects the spirit of *Transform4Europe*: to be a 'knowledge entrepreneur' capable of strengthening communities through environmental, digital, and societal transformation.

When I arrived in Portugal, I faced the challenges that many international students encounter: unfamiliar cultural practices, linguistic barriers, a different educational system, and the need to rebuild my support network from the beginning. In those early stages, community often felt like a distant concept, something I had left behind in Iran, rather than something I had yet to discover in Europe. But as I progressed through my studies, I began to recognize that community is not simply found; it is actively shaped through connections, shared goals, and openness. It is built in classrooms, laboratories, hallways, international student groups, and collaborative projects that bring people together across cultures.

My deepest sense of belonging emerged when I joined my current research group at CBQF, a research centre in Biotech at UCP, where I found not only colleagues but also mentors and friends. In the laboratory environment, where experimentation, uncertainty, and perseverance coexist, I experienced what it means to be part of a community of practice. Support from professors, guidance from supervisors, and the encouragement of peers created a sense of integration that felt both personal and academic. The lab became a space where I could contribute meaningfully, grow intellectually, and feel valued as a researcher. It was here that I first understood that community is reinforced through shared challenges and the collective pursuit of knowledge.

As a food science researcher working on new products development, plant-based innovations, and sustainable processing technologies, my academic journey has always been intertwined with societal needs. Food is one of the most universal elements of community life; it carries cultural identity, health implications, environmental impact, and economic meaning. Through my research, I contribute to an area that affects diverse communities: people with dietary restrictions, individuals seeking healthier alternatives, and populations moving toward more sustainable food systems. Scientific innovation in food processing is not merely a technical endeavour, it is a way of empowering communities to improve their well-being, reduce environmental impact, and embrace more inclusive dietary practices.

This intersection between personal growth and academic relevance is where I see the *Transform4Europe* mission most clearly reflected. The initiative emphasizes transformation in three dimensions, environmental, digital, and societal, and food science research naturally aligns with all three. Environmentally, my work involves developing sustainable ingredients and reducing processing impacts. Digitally, the scientific methodologies used in contemporary research require precise instrumentation, modelling, and data-driven analysis. Societally, plant-based innovations respond to public health demands, cultural diversity in food consumption, and the need for healthier and more accessible food products. Through these contributions, I engage in what *T4EU* calls “knowledge entrepreneurship”: using research as a tool to generate positive change within and across communities.

Yet, my understanding of community extends beyond my scientific contributions. It includes the multicultural exchange I experience every

day with classmates and fellow researchers from around the world. Each interaction – sharing traditions, discussing perspectives, engaging in collaborative work – creates small bridges between cultures. Over time, these bridges form a network of relationships that reflects the very essence of “Communities,” in the plural. Community is no longer a singular identity tied to a nation, language, or background. It becomes a mosaic of experiences, informed by the diversity of people who interact within the academic ecosystem.

In Portugal, and especially at UCP, I found that community is also shaped by how institutions support the integration of international students. My professors and supervisors have played a crucial role in helping me grow as both a researcher and a person navigating a new cultural environment. Their guidance made it possible for me to develop confidence, resilience, and a sense of direction. This support extends beyond formal academic supervision; it reflects a broader social commitment to include international researchers as full members of the university community.

Today, as I reflect on six years in Portugal and three years at UCP, I see my journey as a transformation not only of academic skills but of identity. I arrived seeking education; I found belonging. I came with scientific curiosity; I discovered the responsibility of contributing knowledge that serves communities. I expected to learn; I learned to participate. In this sense, I embody both meanings of the *T4EU Week 2026* theme: “Community. Communities.” I belong to a community, but I also help build communities – through research, collaboration, cultural exchange, and the ongoing pursuit of knowledge for the collective good.

As both a scientist and an international student, I now view community as the space where personal identity and academic purpose converge. It is where support becomes empowerment, and where knowledge becomes a shared resource. My experience confirms that community is not static but dynamic, shaped continuously by the people who inhabit it. And through the *Transform4Europe* initiative, I hope to continue contributing to communities that reflect resilience, innovation, cultural understanding, and a commitment to a better and more sustainable future.