



Innovation

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Communities of Change: Innovation through connected actors and shared purpose

Innovation stands as a pillar for the advancement of higher education institutions and for their ability to respond effectively to societal, scientific, and economic challenges. Innovation is frequently invoked in higher education, yet its value depends on meaning and direction. At UCP, innovation is a multidimensional endeavour grounded in purpose, driven by impact, and oriented towards positive transformation. Whether through pedagogical transformation, entrepreneurial development, collaborative research structures, or social impact projects, UCP positions innovation as a central value in its mission and strategic aspirations. For UCP, innovation is the disciplined creation of tangible value – scientific, economic, social, and human – grounded in robust knowledge, talent, and an active, deliberate relationship with society's needs. It is also understood as a collective endeavour: it happens when people, disciplines, and institutions connect with intent. Breakthroughs are more often the product of communities that share language and trust, challenge assumptions, and combine complementary strengths. In this sense, the university is not simply a place where innovation occurs, but an enabling environment – a civic and intellectual commons – where students, academics, professional staff, alumni, employers, public bodies, social organisations, investors, and local communities can work together on problems that matter. This emphasis on connected communities of actors and stakeholders is crucial to purposeful innovation: it ensures that challenges are framed with those who experience them, solutions are tested with those who will use them, and impact is assessed with those who are affected.

Innovation in education sits at the foundation of this ecosystem. When education is treated as an engine of innovation, it moves beyond content transmission and becomes a living learning network. Students cease to be passive recipients and become active participants: they learn to think critically, solve complex problems, collaborate across disciplines and cultures, communicate with clarity, and act with responsibility. These capabilities are not ancillary – because innovation depends on asking better questions, connecting diverse fields, and testing solutions with rigour and humility. UCP strives to promote pedagogical excellence through new teaching methodologies and evidence-based practices, as embodied by the *Católica Learning Innovation Lab*¹ (promotes advanced opportunities for reflection and capacity building in educational innovation by interinstitutional events) and the *Prémio de Inovação Pedagógica*² (recognises and encourages outstanding innovative teaching practices). In a world shaped by rapid technological, economic, and cultural change, educational innovation is essential. It strengthens relevance: it connects theory and practice, places real-world challenges at the centre of learning, and builds employability around durable skills – analysis, creativity, teamwork, and ethical judgement – rather than transient tools. It can improve both quality and fairness: new pedagogical approaches, digital resources, and models of lifelong learning can widen access and reduce barriers. It educates for citizenship: involving choices on what should be optimised, who benefits, and what risks are acceptable.

These dynamics become even more powerful when universities operate as part of alliances – formal and informal – across regions and borders, as internationalisation is a catalyst to innovation. University alliances create structured pathways for joint programmes, shared research infrastructures, coordinated doctoral training, and cross-institutional supervision. They also enable talent mobility: students, researchers, and professional staff moving between institutions, laboratories, companies, hospitals, cultural organisations, and public agencies. Such mobility accelerates learning, spreads good practice, and increases the likelihood that ideas will find the right ground to flourish. It also raises the quality threshold: working internationally invites comparison, deepens standards, and encourages methodological excellence. Beyond travel, mobility is also about permeability: the ability of knowledge and people to move between domains – academic, industrial, public and social – without losing coherence or integrity. Innovation with purpose requires this permeability,

since many contemporary challenges are ‘boundary problems’ that cut across health, technology, regulation, behaviour, economics, and culture. The university’s convening role is therefore essential. By creating shared spaces – research consortia, innovation labs, clinical and community partnerships, and entrepreneurial programmes – UCP strengthens the connective tissue that transforms expertise into outcomes. Collaboration should thus be deliberately designed into how problems are framed, how research and innovation are conducted, and how education is delivered.

The relationship between innovation and entrepreneurship follows naturally from this collaborative foundation. At its best, entrepreneurship is applied innovation: turning ideas into sustainable initiatives, building organisations capable of execution, and delivering solutions that address genuine needs. Yet entrepreneurial success is seldom a solo achievement; it depends on networks – mentors who accelerate judgement, peers who broaden perspective, partners who supply capabilities, early adopters who validate usefulness, and investors who finance growth. The university contributes by anchoring these relationships in a shared purpose and by helping teams develop the literacy required to work across stakeholder groups.

Entrepreneurship is central to the innovation ecosystem, supporting the development of new ventures and preparing graduates for an increasingly complex and interdisciplinary world. Concrete examples at UCP are the EIT-funded *ELEVATE* project³, designed to reinforce entrepreneurship in fields such as food biotechnology, biomedicine, artificial intelligence, and the creative industries and the *CATOLICA-LISBON Entrepreneurship Center*⁴. By aiming to transform knowledge into solutions with real impact through training, acceleration programmes and cross-sector collaborations, they illustrate practical links between academic expertise and market-oriented innovation.

Perhaps the most consequential interface between university and society arises when research is translated into real-world solutions – a demanding process of translation between environments with different incentives. On the academic side are discoveries, prototypes, methods, and evidence. On the market side are users, unmet needs, regulation, competitive dynamics, business models, and the requirements of scale. Bridging these worlds is fundamentally relational. It requires long-term partnerships; credible routes for knowledge transfer; and intermediaries who can speak both scientific and commercial languages. Where relevant,

it also requires the management of intellectual property, user validation and field testing, proofs of concept, staged financing, and the capacity to move from laboratory scale to reliable deployment. Here, innovation with impact is best judged not by promise, but by adoption.

Yet translation to market value should not imply reducing the university to a production line. University-led innovation is most valuable when it preserves ambition and integrity: producing high-quality knowledge, maintaining critical independence, and pursuing long-term benefits. Economic impact matters, but it is insufficient on its own. Social, environmental, and cultural outcomes must also be considered. Success should be assessed beyond patents or investment attracted, considering also improved well-being, more effective public services, more humane organisations, stronger communities, and credible pathways to sustainability.

This broader perspective makes social innovation central rather than peripheral. Social innovation involves designing and implementing new and effective responses to persistent societal challenges – poverty, exclusion, ageing population, migration, climate transition – while creating shared value and engaging those affected as participants, not just beneficiaries. It depends on coalitions: municipalities, schools, health providers, community leaders, enterprises, and researchers aligned around a shared theory of change and a sustained commitment. At UCP, innovation also carries a social dimension, and purpose-driven innovation is reflected in initiatives such as *ATES – Área Transversal de Economía Social*⁵ and the *Yunus Center*⁶. These engage in projects aimed at strengthening the organisational capacity of non-profit institutions and promoting social economy innovations with long-term societal benefits and for inclusive prosperity. Such work demonstrates how innovation becomes positive transformation when it is grounded in community realities, shaped by partnerships, and evaluated through outcomes that matter to people's lives.

Ultimately, the most important innovation is that which improves society without sacrificing integrity: education that better equips people to act responsibly; entrepreneurship that creates sustainable value through networks of support; research that becomes real benefit through partnerships and knowledge transfer; and social innovation that advances the common good through community-rooted alliances. UCP, as an academic community and an active participant in international

communities, is well placed to sustain such an approach – one in which innovation is not an end in itself, but a shared commitment to human value, scientific rigour, and demonstrable impact. To innovate in this sense is to shape the future together, conscientiously.

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