

Beyond the Classroom: A Comprehensive Education Model that Transforms Communities

CASO's 20-year experience in the materialisation of the Global Education Pact.

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of Católica Solidária (CASO), a volunteer initiative based at the Portuguese Catholic University in Porto. Operating since 2002 and makes part today of the Unit for the Integral Development of the Person (UDIP), CASO invites students, but also faculty, staff and alumni to engage in volunteering initiatives. Through a structured programme comprising weekly volunteer, one-off opportunities, international projects, and leadership development, CASO embodies Pope Francis's Global Education Pact. The weekly volunteer can be made across eight action areas. These "SER+" (to be more) areas – Shelter, Environment, Culture, Inclusive, Example, Professional, Wisdom and Life – address contemporary social challenges such as exclusion, population ageing, migration and environmental degradation. A mixed-method study undertaken to mark the initiative's twentieth anniversary explored volunteers' perceptions of their experiences and skill development. Quantitative findings indicate a significant perceived impact across three domains: personal development (empowerment and self-knowledge), social development (interpersonal communication and problem-solving) and civic engagement (citizenship and community participation). The article argues that CASO functions as a "living laboratory" for the Global Education Pact, illustrating how university-based volunteering can promote human dignity, fraternity, integral ecology and solidarity. The CASO model is replicable and may inform Catholic universities seeking to cultivate a culture of dialogue and social responsibility.

Keywords: Global Education Pact; Catholic education; university volunteering; solidarity pedagogy; educational fraternity; community engagement

Résumé

Cet article présente l'expérience de Católica Solidária (CASO), une initiative bénévole de l'Université catholique portugaise de Porto. En activité depuis 2002 et faisant aujourd'hui partie de l'Unité pour le développement intégral de la personne (UDIP), CASO invite les étudiants, mais aussi les professeurs, le personnel et les anciens élèves à s'engager dans des initiatives bénévoles. Grâce à un programme structuré comprenant du bénévolat hebdomadaire, des opportunités ponctuelles, des projets internationaux et le développement du leadership, CASO incarne le Pacte mondial pour l'éducation du pape François. Le bénévolat hebdomadaire peut être effectué dans huit domaines d'action. Ces

domaines « SER+ » (être plus) – Shelter (hébergement), Environment (environnement), Culture (culture), Inclusive (inclusion), Example (exemple), Professional (professionnalisme), Wisdom (sagesse) et Life (vie) – abordent les défis sociaux contemporains tels que l'exclusion, le vieillissement de la population, les migrations et la dégradation de l'environnement. Une étude mixte menée à l'occasion du vingtième anniversaire de l'initiative a exploré la perception qu'ont les bénévoles de leurs expériences et du développement de leurs compétences. Les résultats quantitatifs indiquent un impact significatif dans trois domaines : le développement personnel (autonomisation et connaissance de soi), le développement social (communication interpersonnelle et résolution de problèmes) et l'engagement civique (citoyenneté et participation communautaire). L'article soutient que le CASO fonctionne comme un « laboratoire vivant » pour le Pacte mondial pour l'éducation, illustrant comment le volontariat universitaire peut promouvoir la dignité humaine, la fraternité, l'écologie intégrale et la solidarité. Le modèle CASO est reproductible et peut inspirer les universités catholiques qui cherchent à cultiver une culture du dialogue et de la responsabilité sociale.

Mots clés : Pacte mondial pour l'éducation ; éducation catholique ; volontariat universitaire ; pédagogie de la solidarité ; fraternité éducative ; engagement communautaire.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso de Católica Solidária (CASO), una iniciativa de voluntariado con sede en la Universidad Católica Portuguesa de Oporto. En funcionamiento desde 2002 y que hoy forma parte de la Unidad para el Desarrollo Integral de la Persona (UDIP), CASO invita a los estudiantes, pero también al profesorado, al personal y a los antiguos alumnos a participar en iniciativas de voluntariado. A través de un programa estructurado que comprende voluntariado semanal, oportunidades puntuales, proyectos internacionales y desarrollo del liderazgo, CASO encarna el Pacto Global de Educación del Papa Francisco. El voluntariado semanal puede realizarse en ocho áreas de acción. Estas áreas «SER+» (ser más) —Alojamiento, Medio ambiente, Cultura, Inclusión, Ejemplo, Profesionalidad, Sabiduría y Vida— abordan retos sociales contemporáneos como la exclusión, el envejecimiento de la población, la migración y la degradación medioambiental. Un estudio de método mixto realizado con motivo del vigésimo aniversario de la iniciativa exploró las percepciones de los voluntarios sobre sus experiencias y el desarrollo de sus habilidades. Los resultados cuantitativos indican un impacto significativo percibido en tres ámbitos: desarrollo personal (empoderamiento y autoconocimiento), desarrollo social (comunicación interpersonal y resolución de problemas) y compromiso cívico (ciudadanía y participación comunitaria). El artículo sostiene que CASO funciona como un «laboratorio viviente» para el Pacto Mundial por la Educación, ilustrando cómo el voluntariado universitario puede promover la dignidad humana, la fraternidad, la ecología integral y la solidaridad. El modelo CASO es replicable y puede servir de referencia a las universidades católicas que buscan cultivar una cultura de diálogo y responsabilidad social.

Palabras clave: Pacto Mundial por la Educación; educación católica; voluntariado universitario; pedagogía de la solidaridad; fraternidad educativa; compromiso con la comunidad

1 Introduction

In response to mounting social fractures and calls for a renewed educational paradigm, Pope Francis launched the Global Education Pact in 2019, inviting educational institutions to re-commit to the formation of younger generations and the construction of more inclusive, fraternal and sustainable societies. Universities have a central role to play in this agenda, and Catholic universities, in particular, are tasked with translating the Church's social teaching into transformative practice. This article analyses how Católica Solidária (CASO), the volunteer centre of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Porto (UCP – Porto), operationalizes the

Global Education Pact through a comprehensive volunteering programme that has been active for over twenty years. Through regular volunteering (minimum 1h30 per week), occasional volunteering, international volunteering (summer months), CASO builds a pedagogy of hope that restores confidence in the future through personal and collective commitment, transforming uncertainties into concrete solidarity action. Regular volunteering involves a select group of students who help with CASO's management structure. These student volunteers are invited to join the group because of their commitment and dedication to volunteering during the year.

Rather than viewing volunteering merely as an extracurricular activity, CASO integrates it into the University's mission of teaching, research and social responsibility, seeking to form "whole persons" steeped in humanistic and spiritual values.

The analysis proceeds in four parts. Section 2 contextualises the Global Education Pact and the commitment of the UCP – Porto to this vision. Section 3 examines the CASO programme as a practical realisation of the Pact, outlining its management structure, the eight SER+ areas and the partnerships that sustain its work. Section 3.3 presents findings from a research study conducted on the occasion of CASO's twentieth anniversary that investigated volunteers' perceptions of the formative impacts of their experiences. Finally, a brief conclusion reflects on the model's replicability and its significance for Catholic higher education.

2 The Global Education Pact and the Portuguese Catholic University

The Global Education Pact, announced by Pope Francis in 2019, seeks to galvanise a worldwide alliance of stakeholders committed to reorienting education towards the cultivation of human dignity, fraternity and care for our common home. By bringing together families, teachers, religious leaders, civil society and government, the Pact aspires to overcome fragmentation and promote an educational process centred on the integral development of the person. For Catholic universities, this call resonates deeply. As institutions "born from the heart of the Church," their mission encompasses academic excellence and knowledge production for the common good, grounded in Christian humanism and attentive to the global context.

The UCP established in 1967, articulates its mission around three pillars: teaching, research and social responsibility. Within this framework, the Unit for the Integral Development of the Person (Unidade para o Desenvolvimento Integral da Pessoa, UDIP) embodies the University's commitment to social engagement. Through CASO, UDIP not only encourages students to acquire knowledge but also to live out the Gospel injunction to love one's neighbour. The alignment between CASO and the Global Education Pact is thus both natural and intentional: both prioritise human dignity, fraternity and the common good; both promote education as a vehicle for social transformation; and both highlight the importance of listening to and involving younger generations in shaping the future.

From the University's perspective, volunteering through CASO moulds students into socially aware citizens and reinforces the mission to develop complete human beings. By engaging directly with local communities, students complement their academic studies with the cultivation of empathy, solidarity and civic responsibility. Such programmes are crucial in contemporary Catholic institutions because they provide concrete opportunities to practise fraternity outside the classroom, counteracting individualism and fostering a sense of belonging to a pluralistic society. As many alumni attest, volunteering leaves an indelible mark: initially, the University thanks volunteers for their availability; ultimately, it is the volunteers who express gratitude for the opportunity to learn and grow.

2.1 Pope's various appeals at WYD23 at the Catholic University

"This elderly man who is speaking to you also dreams of your generation becoming a generation of masters: masters of humanity, masters of compassion, masters of new opportunities for the planet and its inhabitants, masters of hope." Pope Francis WYD23

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has promoted and encouraged young people to be protagonists of change. During World Youth Day 2023 in Lisbon, he reminded university students that higher education remains a "privilege and a responsibility" and called on young people to be protagonists of a "dramatic urgency to care for our common home", recalling that a degree "should not be seen merely as a licence to build personal well-being, but as a mandate to dedicate oneself to a more just and inclusive society, in other words, a more advanced one".

Also during his visit to Lisbon, he made several references to the Global Education Pact and invited everyone to "study the Global Education Pact" and fall in love with it, pointing out that one of the points it deals with is "education for welcome and inclusion" and that one of the objectives of this pact is to "join forces in a broad educational alliance to form mature people, capable of overcoming fragmentation and opposition and rebuilding the fabric of relationships for a more fraternal humanity", challenging the Catholic University to prioritise a humanist and solidarity education as a way of transforming society.

Since then, the UCP, through CASO, has also been inspired by his words and by the first questions God asks man in the Book of Genesis, "Where are you?" (3:9) and "Where is your brother?" (4:9), to continue its mission of promoting volunteering and involving more and more students in volunteering and solidarity practices.

In the next chapter, we'll take a closer look at CASO's volunteer programme and understand better the materialisation of the Global Education Pact. There will also be an opportunity to present a study carried out at UCP on student volunteers' own perceptions of the formative impacts of volunteering, in terms of the most cited personal, social and civic competences, which reflect UCP's mission forming complete people, not only in technical knowledge, but also in human, fraternal and spiritual values.

3 Hope in Action: CASO Realises the Global Education Pact

CASO has played a pivotal role in realising the Global Education Pact by promoting an integral and humanistic education through volunteering. Since its founding in 2002, the centre has mobilised more than three thousand students who have contributed over eighty thousand hours of service. Each year, around two hundred students engage in activities organised around eight thematic areas that respond to pressing social challenges. CASO's model emphasises personal empowerment, empathy, active citizenship and respect for human dignity, thereby placing the person at the centre of the educational process. Students with previous volunteering experience take on leadership roles, contributing to decision-making and programme management. This participatory approach reflects the Pact's commitment to listening to young people and recognising their agency in social transformation. Moreover, CASO fosters inclusion and social justice by partnering with organisations that serve vulnerable populations, cultivates networks of co-operation at local and international levels and ensures accountability through structured management and evaluation processes.

3.1 CASO's volunteer programme

CASO structures its volunteering into three modes: regular, occasional and international. **Regular volunteering** entails a commitment of at least one and a half hours per week throughout the academic year. Volunteers receive orientation, ongoing training and a certificate attesting to their service. **Occasional volunteering** consists of one-off actions such as food drives, blood donations, fundraising and charity events. **International volunteering** takes place during the summer months through the *Fly* and *GAS'África* projects and involves collaboration with communities in vulnerable contexts in Portugal and abroad; these assignments require additional training and typically last from ten days to two months.

For reasons of space and focus, the following text and the research study presented refers exclusively to regular volunteering. The management of regular volunteering is highly structured. A University coordinator oversees the programme, supported by a team of student leaders—one for each SER+ area—who have themselves previously volunteered in the respective area. These leaders mediate between partner organisations and volunteers, facilitate communication, and provide support for new participants. The leadership team, comprising ten to twelve students, is selected at the end of each academic year after determining which volunteers will continue. A training and integration weekend at the start of the new academic year equips them with skills in presenting CASO's activities, volunteer management, database administration and public representation, while also fostering team cohesion and planning the year's activities. In accordance with the Pact's call for young people's participation, CASO makes student leaders active partners in decision-making and programme design.

To ensure clarity and replicability, CASO has developed three guidance manuals—for the Coordinator, the Responsible Student and the Volunteer. These documents set out responsibilities, best practices and procedures and provide an overview of CASO's ethos. Introductory sessions, individual interviews and initial training (both general and area-specific) precede placement with partner institutions. The commitment ceremony formalises volunteers' adherence to the programme and reinforces their sense of responsibility. Throughout the year, CASO holds follow-up meetings, ongoing training sessions and social events. Continuous evaluation—including surveys, reflection meetings and a biennial impact survey of partner institutions—enables the team to adjust strategies and ensures alignment with the University's mission. Collectively, these elements make CASO a sustainable and structured model of university volunteering.

3.2 The eight SER+ areas as a response to contemporary challenges

CASO organises regular volunteering into eight thematic areas called **SER+** (“SER” meaning “to be” in Portuguese and “+” symbolising growth). The underlying philosophy is that volunteering fosters the integral development of the person through reciprocal learning: volunteers and beneficiaries encourage one another to “be more.”

- **SER+ Shelter** addresses homelessness, migration and prison populations. Volunteers prepare and serve meals in solidarity canteens, provide Portuguese-language tuition and cultural integration activities for migrants and support educational and recreational programmes in prisons.
- **SER+ Environment** engages volunteers in environmental education, conservation of native species and ecological restoration projects.

- **SER+ Culture** involves collaboration with museums and cultural institutions to make culture more accessible, particularly through educational programmes for diverse audiences.
- **SER+ Inclusive** supports children and adults with disabilities, providing personalised assistance that promotes autonomy and participation in community life.
- **SER+ Example** focuses on children and young people at risk of social exclusion, offering academic tutoring, mentoring and leisure activities in schools, day-care centres and community centres.
- **SER+ Professional** facilitates skills development and career mentoring for young adults, linking academic studies with professional aspirations.
- **SER+ Wisdom** centres on older adults, combating social isolation through visits, assistance with daily activities and intergenerational dialogue.
- **SER+ Life** engages volunteers in initiatives that promote health, well-being and a holistic approach to life and its challenges.

The city of Porto faces acute social challenges, including rising poverty and homelessness, an ageing population, increasing migration and growing numbers of children and young people at risk. CASO's diversified programme aims to address these challenges by connecting the University community to the surrounding society (Municipality of Porto, 2024; Municipality of Porto, 2025-2030). For example, children in study centres receive academic support and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills; persons with disabilities gain greater autonomy and social inclusion; environmental projects contribute to conservation and education; and cultural initiatives make heritage more accessible. Partnerships with more than fifty institutions are crucial: they are chosen for their alignment with the University's mission, geographical proximity, relevance and compatibility with students' schedules. By strengthening ties between the University and society, CASO promotes sustainable impact and the values of co-operation, equity and solidarity.

3.3 A research study on CASO's twenty-year experience - Volunteers' perceptions of the formative impacts of volunteering

Based on CASO's 20-year experience, a research study was conducted to better understand and explore the perceptions of different generations of CASO volunteers (students and alumni) regarding their volunteer experiences and the impact they perceive on their personal, social, and civic development.

This research objective is well-grounded in literature. Several studies highlight the relevance of integrating community outreach practices, such as volunteering and social responsibility projects, as a training strategy that enhances the integral development of higher education students (Bhagwan, 2020; Raykov & Taylor, 2021). The impact of volunteering practices on student training is, as such, consensual, allowing for the development of personal, social and professional skills in a real context (Meyer et al., 2019; Raykov & Taylor, 2021).

Specifically, in this article, we analysed the perspectives of student volunteers regarding the impact they perceive from their regular volunteering experience at CASO in terms of the development of personal, social and civic skills, concerning the following: learning, employability, personal empowerment, active citizenship, civic participation, interpersonal and problem-solving skills, political awareness, leadership, pro-social justice attitudes, and pro-diversity attitudes. This set of skills was identified based on previous studies, namely the Life Skills and Citizenship Education model (UNICEF/World Bank, 2019, in Hoskins & Liu, 2019) and the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (Moely et al., 2002).

As a data collection tool, we used the **Questionnaire on Personal, Social and Civic Competences in Volunteering (Q-CPSCV)**, which was designed for this purpose and validated by the research team. This is organised into three parts: Part I refers to the characterisation of the volunteer and the volunteering experience, and Parts II and III were constructed in light of the two theoretical frameworks mentioned above, after authorisation from the respective authors. These two sections referred to the level of development of each of the skills identified above, considering the volunteering experience: ‘Based on your volunteering experience, to what extent do you consider that you have developed each of these skills?’ using a 5-point Likert scale (between ‘1 - I totally disagree’ and ‘5 - I totally agree’).

After defining the inclusion criteria, a sample of 98 UCP students was constituted, with the requirement that they had participated in at least one regular volunteer activity at CASO in the four academic years prior to the study. The majority of participants were female (91.8%), with an average age of 21.3 years (ranging from 19 to 41 years), most of whom were pursuing a bachelor's degree (86.7%) in the fields of Psychology (28.6%) and Law (23.5%). The most popular areas of volunteering were SER+ Example (32.7%) and SER+ Welcoming (30.6%).

This quantitative study aimed to identify trends in the results (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024), seeking to quantify the relationships between volunteer experiences and their effects on the development of personal, social, and civic skills. To this end, IBM SPSS quantitative data analysis software (version 28) was used to perform descriptive (mean and standard deviation) and inferential (association tests) analyses of quantitative data collected with the administration of the Q-CPSCV.

In general, participants reported high levels of skill development through their volunteering experience, with the following standing out positively: **Active Citizenship** ($M = 4.61$; $SD = .76$) and **Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills** ($M = 4.43$; $SD = .39$), **Personal Empowerment** ($M = 4.42$; $SD = .83$) and **Civic Participation** ($M = 4.21$; $SD = .55$). By contrast, **Pro-Diversity Attitudes** ($M = 3.01$; $SD = 0.44$) and **Pro-Social Justice Attitudes** ($M = 3.07$; $SD = 0.37$) were the least mentioned.

To better understand these results, Spearman's correlation test was performed to obtain the correlation matrix between the various skills reported by the participants. Several positive associations were found, notably the following: Personal Empowerment and Active Citizenship ($\rho = .66$, $p < .001$), Civic Participation and Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills ($\rho = .64$, $p < .001$) and Personal Empowerment and Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills ($\rho = .51$, $p < .001$). These data seem to indicate possible combinations of skills associated with volunteer experience. For example, for participants, volunteer experience enhances the combined development of Personal Empowerment and Active Citizenship skills.

In summary, the data reported by the student volunteers reveal a positive perception of the impact of this experience on the development of their personal, social and civic skills, with particular emphasis on Active Citizenship, Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills, Personal Empowerment and Civic Participation. There is, therefore, an appreciation of a dimension of personal growth, as well as an applied dimension of citizenship that presupposes its practice. These data are corroborated by the literature: volunteering offers individuals the opportunity to acquire valuable life skills and experience personal development, fostering their civic identity and enhancing social skills (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020), effectively contributing to the materialisation of the Global Education Pact.

4 Conclusion

CASO stands as a concrete embodiment of Pope Francis's Global Education Pact within a university setting. By mobilising students, even though staff and alumni, to serve vulnerable populations through a structured, reflective and student-centred programme, CASO cultivates competencies that extend beyond disciplinary knowledge. Volunteers gain personal empowerment and social skills, build fraternity with diverse communities and engage actively as citizens. The programme's emphasis on integral human development, participatory leadership and continuous evaluation ensures its sustainability and reproducibility.

For Catholic universities seeking to strengthen their social responsibility and align with the Global Education Pact, CASO offers a replicable model. Its success lies in combining clear organisational structures (guidance manuals, leadership training, evaluation), diverse opportunities that respond to local needs and a pedagogy of hope that turns uncertainty into meaningful action. In an era marked by social fragmentation, such initiatives exemplify how higher education can contribute to building more just, inclusive and compassionate societies.

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