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PROGRAMME

DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The PhD Programme in «Democracy in the 21st Century» is a joint initiative of the Centre for Social Studies (CES) and the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra (FEUC). Since its inception in 2007, it has established itself as a space for critical reflection and advanced training focused on the political, social, and institutional transformations shaping contemporary democracies.

With a curriculum that combines theoretical grounding, methodological deepening, and individualized supervision of research projects, the programme welcomes students from diverse academic and professional backgrounds, fostering a learning environment marked by diversity, scientific rigour, and interdisciplinary dialogue.

The programme includes a taught component focusing on topics such as democratic governance, citizen participation, social movements, inequalities, racism, and the ecological crisis, followed by a phase dedicated to research and the writing of the doctoral thesis.

Throughout their PhD, candidates are encouraged to engage in ongoing research projects, participate in scientific networks, and benefit from an international academic environment.

The programme awards the degree of Doctor of Sociology from the University of Coimbra and may, in cases covered by specific cooperation agreements, lead to a double degree with partner foreign universities.¹

¹ In previous editions, co-tutelle agreements were established with the Università di Padova (Italy), Sapienza Università di Roma (Italy), and Universidad de Santiago de Compostela (Spain).

TRAINING OBJECTIVES

The curriculum is grounded in the premise that there is no single model of democracy, but rather multiple democratic forms, expressed through diverse experiences and rooted in specific social realities.

Democracy is understood as a dynamic and continuously evolving field, shaped by a range of social actors and marked by inequalities, conflicts, cultural identities, struggles for recognition, and disputes over the common good. As a living social phenomenon, it takes different forms across local, national, and supranational scales.

The programme aims to understand the functioning and evolution of these forms of democracy, analyzing how the great challenges of our time—from the ecological crisis to growing inequalities, from the reorganization of work to technological transformations—influence their institutions and practices.

Through a strong theoretical and methodological foundation, the course equips students with the tools to carry out critical and innovative research on new forms of citizen participation and emerging models of democratic governance and political institutionalisation. In doing so, it contributes to the advancement of knowledge and to the renewal of debates on democracy in the 21st century.



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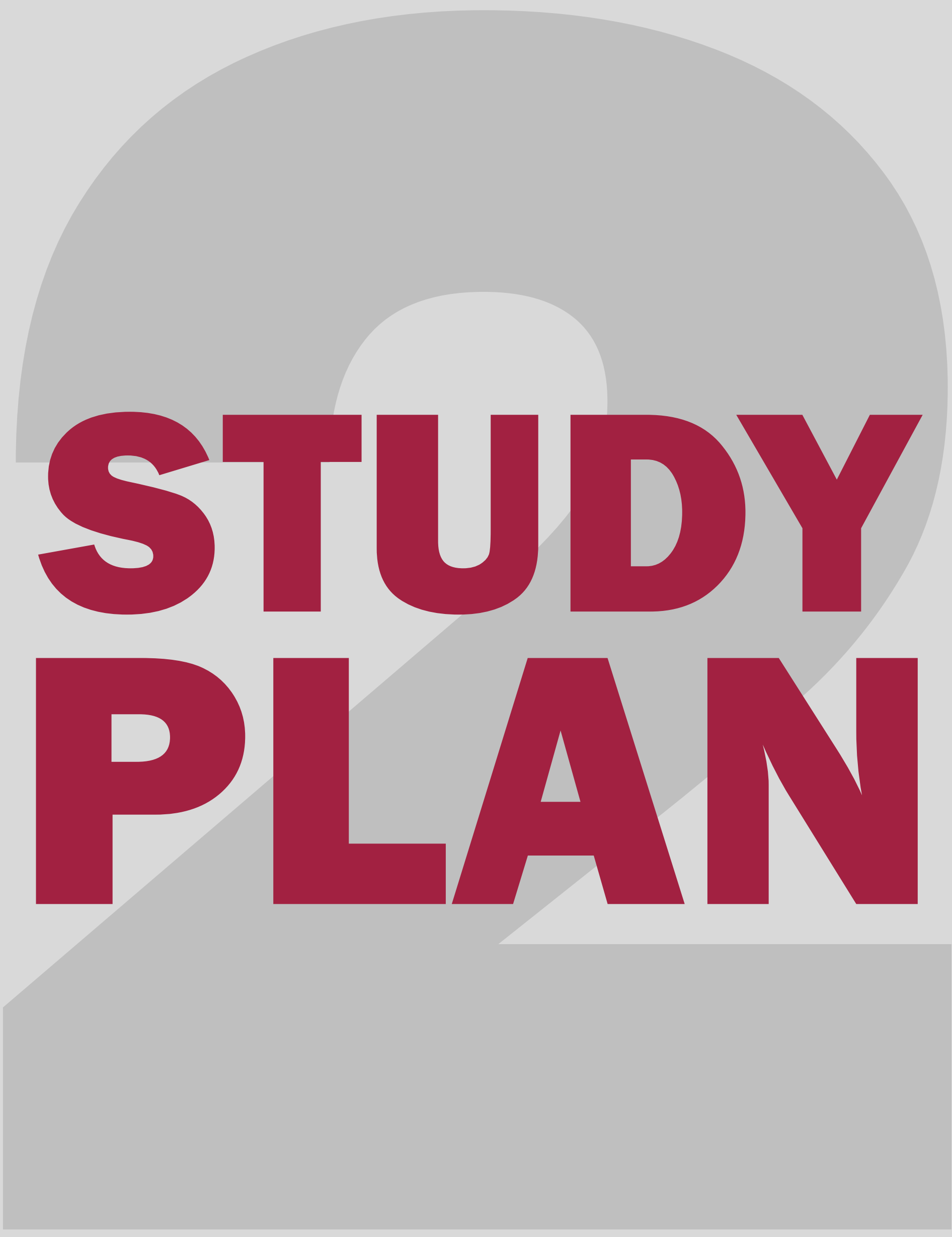
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EM DEFESA DA EDUCACAO

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NEGRAS IMPORTANTES
Renata Souza

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#FORA



STUDY PLAN

STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY PLAN

The PhD programme has a duration of four years, corresponding to eight semesters and a total of 240 ECTS credits. It is structured in two phases: the taught component, which spans the first three semesters, and the research phase, which extends over the following five semesters.

During the first two semesters, students attend two types of seminars. The introductory seminars provide an overview of the functioning of democratic political institutions, with particular emphasis on the theoretical foundations of representative democracy and its transformations in a global context. The thematic seminars, in turn, address different dimensions of the relationship between the political system and society, exploring topics such as climate justice, contemporary social movements, institutional racism, and citizen participation in public policies.

In the third semester, the methodological seminars offer analytical and operational tools for developing the doctoral research project. The Research Methodologies seminar introduces students to both qualitative and quantitative research techniques through a critical lens, while the Thesis Project seminar supports them in formulating their research problem, constructing their theoretical framework, and defining appropriate methods.

To complete the taught phase, students must present and defend their thesis project before a panel that includes a specialist from the relevant thematic area, external to the programme.

Upon successful completion of the taught component (70 ECTS), students may request a Certificate of Completion for the Advanced Specialisation Course in Democracy Studies.

The research phase begins in the fourth semester and culminates in the writing and defence of the doctoral thesis.

FIRST SEMESTER

1 | Democratic Theories and Institutions (10 ECTS)

This seminar explores different ways of thinking about and practicing democracy across time and in diverse historical and geographical contexts. Structured in three modules, it offers a critical analysis of: (i) how liberal representative democracy emerged and was consolidated; (ii) the critiques it has faced and the alternative proposals that have been developed; and (iii) the challenges it confronts in the 21st century. It provides an opportunity for critical reflection on the present and future of democracy in its many forms.

Coordinators: Cristiano Gianolla (CES), Daniel Francisco (FEUC)

2 | Ecological Crisis and Democracy (10 ECTS)

How do environmental issues intersect with social justice and democratic systems? This course invites students to reflect on the origins of the ecological crisis and how different paradigms contribute to its understanding. Topics include the Anthropocene, Green Capitalism, and Climate Trauma, with a focus on identifying those most affected by environmental transformations and exploring possible democratic responses.

Coordinators: Irina Velicu (CES), António Carvalho (FEUC/CES)

3 | “Race” and Racism in Democratic Societies (10 ECTS)

What role does racism play in our democracies? This course offers critical and interdisciplinary tools to analyse how the idea of ‘race’ and racist practices have been articulated with the concepts of nation, citizenship, and democracy. It also addresses current debates on governing difference — from antigypsyism to Islamophobia — and the role of the media and public policies.

Coordinator: Marta Araújo (CES)

SECOND SEMESTER

4 | Social Movements and Democracy (10 ECTS)

Social movements play a central role today in shaping democratic transformation. This seminar examines the conditions under which they emerge, the forms of action they develop, and their impact in democratic and non-democratic contexts. Topics include activism, digital citizenship, cyberactivism, and technopolitics, with reflection on the role of social networks and collective action in fostering innovative forms of participation and public debate.

Coordinator: Ana Raquel Matos (CES/FEUC)

5 | Public Policies and Civic Participation (10 ECTS)

How can citizen participation transform public policy? This course focuses on innovative experiences of participatory and deliberative governance. Case studies such as participatory budgeting and citizen involvement in health policy are analysed, exploring the impact of decentralisation, digital technologies, and new forms of collective engagement in promoting the common good.

Coordinator: Giovanni Allegretti (CES), Mauro Serapioni (CES)

6 | Global Governance and Democracy (10 ECTS)

We live in an increasingly interconnected world — but how is it governed at a global level? This course examines key models and theories of global governance, questioning their impact on democracies and democratisation processes. It reflects on the balance (or imbalance) between economics and politics, and on the possibilities for building a more just and democratic global order.

Coordinator: Sofia José Santos (FEUC/CES)

THIRD SEMESTER

7 | Research Methods (10 ECTS)

Doing research in the social sciences also entails ethical, political, and epistemological choices. This seminar offers a critical introduction to major methodological approaches and techniques for data collection and analysis. Drawing from their own projects, PhD students are invited to reflect on the research design best suited to what they aim to understand and transform.

Coordinator: Sílvia Portugal (FEUC/CES)

8 | Thesis Project (20 ECTS)

This seminar supports the design and structuring of the doctoral project. Throughout the sessions, students work on formulating their research questions, critically reviewing literature, defining methods, addressing ethical issues, and developing strategies for scientific communication. By the end of the semester, they will be prepared to present their proposal with clarity and rigour in both academic and non-academic settings.

Coordinator: Andrés Spognardi (CES)

THESIS

From the fourth to the eighth semester, students dedicate themselves exclusively to developing their doctoral thesis, under the supervision of a faculty member from the University of Coimbra and, where applicable, one or two co-supervisors from other national or international institutions. The thesis may take the form of a monograph or a coherent set of published or publishable scientific articles.

Coordinator: Andrés Spognardi (CES)





FACULTY

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FACULTY WITH INTERNATIONAL REACH

The programme is supported by a highly qualified faculty, composed of researchers with extensive experience in teaching, research, and public engagement. With academic backgrounds from leading universities in Portugal, Italy, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and with careers rooted in fields such as Sociology, Political Science, Urban, Territorial and Environmental Planning, International Relations, and Educational Sciences, this team ensures a critical, interdisciplinary, and comparative approach to contemporary democratic dynamics.

They also participate in international research networks and projects, serve as consultants and evaluators for civil society organisations, and maintain collaborations with academic institutions across several continents.

This reinforces the programme's international visibility and creates opportunities for mobility and cooperation for doctoral students.

RESEARCH INTERESTS

The faculty's research focuses on key issues for understanding contemporary democracies. Topics include collective action through protest, forms of citizen participation and public policy; health inequalities and public systems in times of crisis; populisms, migration, and political discourse; media, emotions, and technopolitics; ecological and food justice; urban governance and participatory planning; the social and solidarity economy as an alternative to the dominant economic model; social rights and care policies; as well as disputes surrounding colonial memory and ethno-racial equality.

LATEST PUBLICATIONS

During the 2024/2025 academic year, the program's faculty published scientific articles in prestigious international journals, such as *Agriculture and Human Values*; *Business History*; *Cadernos de Saúde Pública*; *Emotions and Society*; *Energy Research & Social Science*; *Environment & Planning*; *Globalizations*; *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*; *Physis: Revista de Saúde Coletiva*; *Politics and Governance*; *Regional Studies and Local Development*; *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*; *Saúde e Sociedade*; *Social Identities: Journal of the Study of Race, Nation, and Culture*; *Social Sciences*; *Theory, Culture and Society*; and *Urban Political Ecology*. They also published books and chapters with publishers such as Cities, Città Nuova, Editora Unesp, Edward Elgar, Fundação Bissaya Barreto, Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, Mare & Martin, Routledge, and Springer.

ONGOING PROJECTS

In 2025, the program's faculty coordinate or are part of research teams in national and international projects funded by various entities, including the European Union (within the scope of Horizon Europe and COST Action), the Spencer Foundation, and the Foundation for Science and Technology. Among the ongoing projects are: [CO3](#) – *Continuous Construction of resilient social contracts through societal transformations*; [FITTER](#) – *Advancing Social Justice to reduce inequality in Europe's Twin Transitions*; [GREENPATHS](#) – *European Knowledge Hub on Just Transition Pathways*; *Nets4Dem – Rede de Redes para a Democracia*; [PEACE](#) – *Peace Research Community Europe*; [PHOENIX](#) – *The Rise of Citizens' Voices for a Greener Europe*; [PROTEST](#) – *Protest as a Democracy Test*; [PSYGLOCAL](#) – *Sofrimento psíquico e direitos humanos*; [RE:FRAME](#) – *O Ensino da História da Escravização e de Raça no Nexo Colônia-Metrópole*; [SINCRONY](#) – *interSectional iNClusion in delibeRation and participatiON with Youth*; e [UnCoveR](#) – *Violência sexual nas paisagens mediáticas portuguesas*.

404

Oops, Democracy
Not Found!

The government might be
corrupted.

Or the justice may have been
removed.

GO BACK TO
STREET



STUDENTS

A PLURAL COMMUNITY

DIVERSITY OF DISCIPLINARY BACKGROUNDS

The programme «Democracy in the 21st Century» welcomes students with diverse academic and professional trajectories, coming from various fields within the social sciences and humanities — such as Sociology, Political Science, International Relations, Anthropology, Economics, History, or Cultural Studies — as well as from other areas interested in critical reflection on democracy. This diversity contributes to a dynamic learning environment, open to interdisciplinary dialogue and the exchange of theoretical and practical experiences.

DIVERSITY OF PROFESSIONAL PROFILES

The programme attracts both early-career researchers at the beginning of their academic journeys and professionals with extensive experience in public administration, non-governmental organisations, social movements, journalism, education, or international cooperation. Many students have already taken part in civic engagement or community work projects and seek, through doctoral research, to deepen the theoretical and methodological foundations of their practice.

DIVERSITY OF NATIONALITIES

The PhD brings together students from several continents, creating an international, critical, and collaborative community. This multicultural environment enriches academic debate and fosters the development of transnational research networks.

« Pursuing this PhD brought me into contact with a diverse range of new and relevant topics for the critical study of democracies today. For the development of my research project, I found the necessary support through productive debate in the seminars dedicated to this purpose. »

Daniela Lima, Brazil.
Student



■ NATIONALITIES OF STUDENTS ADMITTED TO THE PROGRAM BETWEEN 2007 AND 2024

■ NATIONALITIES OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE PROGRAM IN 2025

◀◀ *Having a considerable number of collaborators and guest lecturers from various fields, the programme offers both a strong theoretical background in a vast area of subjects, as well as a better comprehension of the latest debates in social sciences.* ▶▶

Hestia Delibas, Romania
Student



70%
international
students

17
nationalities

CRITICAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

The research carried out by doctoral students reflects the thematic and geographical diversity that characterises the programme.

Ongoing projects and completed theses address the main challenges facing contemporary democracies, spanning different scales — from the local to the transnational — and multiple regions — from Latin America to European contexts, from Africa to the Middle East and Asia.

MOST RECENT THESES DEFENDED

- Forbidden mothers: The removal of Guarani-Kaiowá children, indigenous maternity, and ethnocide | [Karina Pinhão \(Brazil\)](#)
- The Rise of Global South WhatsAppers | [Sérgio Barbosa \(Brazil\)](#)
- At the crossroads between theory and praxis: How Kurdish Democratic Confederalism is articulating feminism, democracy, and ecology | [Eleonora Gea Piccardi \(Italy\)](#)
- For a political ecology of the subaltern: Plebs, commoners, and the re-invention of democracy in Naples, Southern Italy | [Roberto Sciarelli \(Italy\)](#)
- Information and Communication Technologies in the construction of emancipation spaces: Contexts of participatory budgets in Porto Alegre and their reflections in Portugal | [Maria Margareth Lins Rossal \(Brazil\)](#)
- The role of participation in the new models of political party | [Marco Meloni \(Italy\)](#)
- Housing struggles, occupations and evictions in the Lisbon metropolitan area | [Saila-Maria Saaristo \(Finland\)](#)

THE WORK OF GRADUATES

Graduates of the programme pursue careers marked by a strong commitment to knowledge production, advanced training, and qualified engagement across a range of professional contexts, both academic and non-academic.

RESEARCH AND TEACHING

The programme has contributed to the training of researchers and lecturers who are now part of leading universities and research centres in various regions of the world. In Brazil, notable institutions include the University of São Paulo, the University of Brasília, the Federal University of Bahia, and the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná. In Portugal, graduates of the programme carry out scientific work at the Centre for Social Studies, the Institute of Social Sciences – University of Lisbon, the Network Centre for Anthropological Research (CRIA), and ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon. The international reach of the programme is also evident in the placement of former students in higher education and research institutions in countries such as Italy (University of Padua, Polytechnic University of Milan, University of Catania), Canada (University of Alberta), France (Sciences Po), England (University of Southampton), and Switzerland (University of Geneva).

SCIENCE MANAGEMENT

Several graduates have taken on roles in projects and institutions dedicated to the management and promotion of scientific research, such as the PHOENIX Project and ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon, in Portugal, and Centro Universitário das Américas, in Brazil.

PRIVATE SECTOR

The programme has also trained professionals working in the private sector in areas such as consultancy, strategic communication, and policy analysis, with placements in companies such as Lattanzio KIBS (Italy) and MV Comunicação (Brazil).

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The training provided also equips graduates for roles in public institutions, as illustrated by the case of a programme graduate who currently serves as Secretary for Citizen Participation in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico.

« This PhD gave me the opportunity to expand my knowledge (from feminism to participatory democracy, passing through ecology and anti-racism) and provided the necessary frameworks to study the state of current democracies. CES is the ideal place to critically analyze societies, democracy and power. »

Marco Meloni, PhD graduate of the programme. Researcher at the University of Southampton, England.

« CES is a pole of concentration of critical and diverse thinking. As an activist, CES provided me an intellectually stimulant environment to develop my ideas, discuss them and learn with academic-activists, students, researchers and professors from across the world. »

Jonas Van Vossole, PhD graduate of the programme. Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), Portugal.

UNIVERSITY

PART

- DEMOCRACIA -



SCHOLARSHIPS & FUNDING

FCT SCHOLARSHIPS

CES is the host research institution for students of the programme, supporting them in applying for various national and international funding opportunities.

Among the most significant are the doctoral scholarships from the [Foundation for Science and Technology \(FCT\)](#), awarded annually through calls that are usually open between March and April. CES and the programme’s coordination team provide support throughout all stages of the application process – from eligibility checks and the issuance of institutional documents to the revision of proposals. The criteria for issuing the institutional endorsement are available on [the CES website](#).

SUCCESS RATE

Students of the PhD in «Democracy in the 21st Century» have shown particularly strong performance in these competitions. Since 2016, 22 students from the programme have submitted applications for FCT doctoral scholarships, with 18 securing funding (see Figure A). Of those successful applicants, 89% were approved on their first or second attempt (see Figure B).

Figure A. Programme students who applied for FCT scholarships, 2016-2024

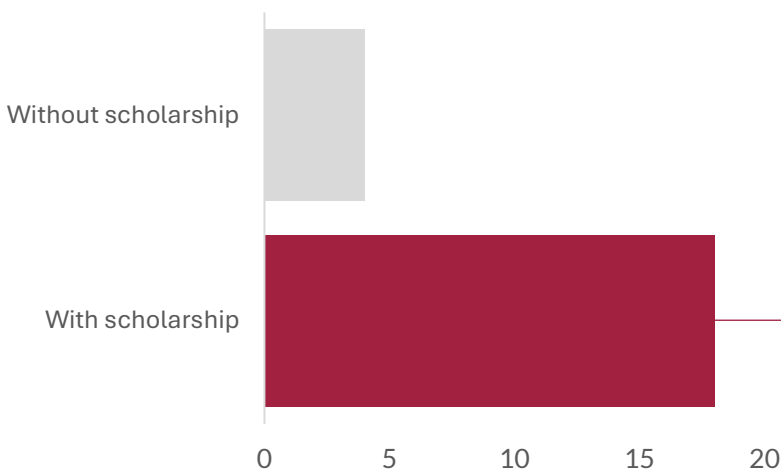
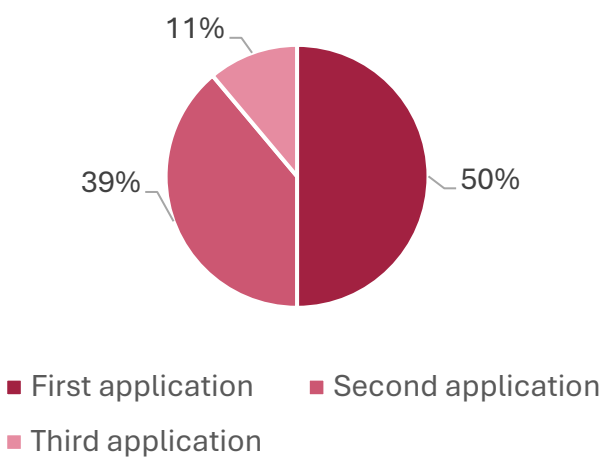


Figure B. Programme students awarded FCT scholarships, 2016-2024.



OTHER SOURCES OF SUPPORT

ALTERNATIVE SCHOLARSHIPS AND GRANTS

In addition to FCT, doctoral students may apply for funding from other institutions, such as the [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation](#), the [Luso-American Development Foundation \(FLAD\)](#), [Camões – Institute for Cooperation and Language](#), as well as the student services of African Countries with Portuguese as an Official Language (PALOP) embassies.

MOBILITY SUPPORT

The [International Relations Division of the University of Coimbra](#) regularly publishes calls for mobility support grants.

SUPPORT FOR PARTICIPATION IN EVENTS

The programme has a small dedicated fund to support student participation in conferences, workshops, and Summer Schools.

OPPORTUNITIES IN RESEARCH PROJECTS

CES also hosts a wide range of funded research projects, often offering opportunities for the recruitment of junior researchers. We recommend regularly checking the "Jobs, Grants & Internships" section of [the CES website](#).



JAN BREIDEN
PIETER DE CONINCK

WHAT DO YOU
DO TO FIGHT
CLIMATE CHANGE?

LIVING IN COIMBRA

THE CITY OF STUDENTS

Enrolling in the PhD Programme in «Democracy in the 21st Century» is also an opportunity to live in the city of Coimbra, a place with a strong academic tradition, rich cultural life, and excellent quality of life. Coimbra offers a stimulating and welcoming experience for doctoral students from all over the world.

A UNIVERSITY CITY

Coimbra is known as the «city of students» and is home to the University of Coimbra, founded in 1290, one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Europe. The presence of the university shapes daily life in the city, with libraries, archives, cultural spaces, cafés, and gardens that invite both study and socialising. The city's medium size allows for easy travel on foot or by bike between home, the university, and other essential services, contributing to a relaxed and sustainable lifestyle.

COST OF LIVING AND ACCOMMODATION

Compared to other European university cities, Coimbra has a relatively affordable cost of living. There are various accommodation options, from university halls of residence to shared rooms and flats in different parts of the city. The [University of Coimbra's Social Action Services](#) provides support in finding accommodation and other practical matters related to settling in the city.

CULTURE, LEISURE, NATURE

The city boasts a vibrant cultural life, with theatres, cinemas, independent bookshops, concerts, markets, and festivals held throughout the year. The Centre for Social Studies (CES) further enriches this dynamic environment by regularly organising conferences, debates, and film screenings. For nature lovers, Coimbra offers numerous green spaces and is situated along the Mondego River, where you can enjoy sports or simply take a relaxing stroll.

ACADEMIC AND INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The CES and the University of Coimbra host a diverse international academic community, fostering an intercultural and inclusive atmosphere. The city is safe, welcoming, and ideal for focused research, as well as for networking and exchanging ideas among students and researchers from around the world. Coimbra is, therefore, an excellent choice for those seeking to combine academic excellence with a high quality of life in one place.

TRANSPORT AND MOBILITY

Coimbra is well-connected to the rest of the country, with efficient rail and road networks providing quick links to Lisbon, Porto, and other major cities. The proximity of Lisbon and Porto international airports also ensures convenient international travel for students.

FURTHER INFORMATION





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APPLICATIONS 2025/26

APPLICATIONS 2025/26

WHO CAN APPLY

- Holders of a master's degree or legally equivalent qualification.
- Holders of a bachelor's degree in Sociology, Political Science, or other Social Sciences and Humanities, provided they present an exceptionally relevant academic or scientific background. This must be formally recognised by the Scientific Council as demonstrating the candidate's ability to undertake this cycle of studies.*

* This recognition serves only for admission to the doctoral programme and does not confer equivalence to a master's degree or official recognition of such a degree.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Applications must be submitted exclusively through the online platform InforEstud@nte.

Detailed application instructions can be found [here](#).

A non-refundable application fee of €50 applies, including in cases of invalidated applications or unsuccessful placement.

At the application stage, only digital copies of required documents are accepted. Shortlisted candidates who proceed to enrolment will be asked to submit authenticated hard copies of their documents by 31 December 2025.

APPLICATION PERIODS

2 June – 15 July 2025

1 September – 12 September 2025

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

- **Motivation Letter** written in Portuguese or English with a maximum length of one page. This letter should present in a clear and objective manner the reasons justifying the application, demonstrating the candidate's academic, professional and research interests while explaining how the programme aligns with their objectives and future plans (mandatory);
- An up-to-date **curriculum vitae**, including full academic and professional experience;
- **Degree Certificates**. Submit official documents confirming the final grade(s) awarded for completed degree(s). For foreign institutions, include the grading scale used (mandatory, unless the degree was awarded by the University of Coimbra);
- **Research proposal**, written in Portuguese or English with a maximum length of two pages. It should clearly and objectively present the research topic, study objectives and its scientific, social or political relevance. The text should demonstrate the project's alignment with the doctoral programme and, where relevant, mention the methods or approaches the candidate intends to explore. Up to five bibliographical references may be included (mandatory);
- **Proof of English Language Proficiency** (when available). Alternatively, candidates may provide a **self-declaration stating** their level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Europass scale (A1 to C2) (mandatory);
- **Identification Document** (mandatory for international applicants).

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

TEACHING SCHEDULE

Teaching sessions take place on Fridays (full day, from 10:00 to 17:00) and Saturdays (mornings, from 10:00 to 13:00). Students are required to attend the seminars outlined in the study plan, as well as guest speaker sessions organised as part of the programme's activities.

WORKING LANGUAGES

The programme languages are English and Portuguese. Proficiency in Portuguese is not a requirement for admission. Applicants who are not fluent in the language may enquire about the availability of [language courses](#) offered by the University of Coimbra.

ACADEMIC CALENDAR 2025/26

The first semester runs from September to January, and the second semester from February to July. The academic calendar for the 2025/26 academic year is available [here](#).

TUITION FEES

The annual tuition fee is €2,000.

APPLICATIONS 2025/26

APPLICATION PERIODS

- 2 June – 15 July 2025
- 1 September – 12 September 2025

WHO CAN APPLY

- Holders of a master's degree or legally equivalent qualification.
- Holders of a bachelor's degree in Sociology, Political Science, or other Social Sciences and Humanities, provided they present an exceptionally relevant academic or scientific background. This must be formally recognised by the Scientific Council as demonstrating the candidate's ability to undertake this cycle of studies.*

* This recognition serves only for admission to the doctoral programme and does not confer equivalence to a master's degree or official recognition of such a degree.

APPLICATION SUBMISSION

Applications must be submitted exclusively through the InforEstud@nte online platform.*

* A non-refundable application fee of €50 is required, which applies in all cases - including invalidated applications or instances where the applicant is not placed on the programme.

FURTHER INFORMATION



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