Summary of

A Strategic Vision for Jesuit Higher Education Networks

By Susana Di Trolio, PhD[1].

Abstract

This article presents a strategic analysis of networking in Jesuit higher education grounded in the operational realities of Jesuit universities. It comprehensively examines Jesuit university networks, focusing on their formation, challenges, and best practices for fostering sustainable collaboration. The article argues that Jesuit networks are vital tools for advancing the mission of Jesuit higher education. The insights offered inform broader discussions on the strategic role of academic networks in advancing mission-driven education and global cooperation in higher education. The paper is structured in three parts: an overview of the rationale behind these networks, an exploration of the risks and critical challenges they face, including resource constraints and governance complexities, and strategies for promoting effective collaboration.

1.   Context and Purpose of Jesuit Networks

Di Trolio begins by outlining the remarkable growth of Jesuit university networks over the past two decades. Several key drivers of this expansion are discussed:

- Globalisation: As the world has become more interconnected, Jesuit institutions have increasingly recognised the need for cross-border collaboration to address complex global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and socio-environmental justice.
- Technological Advances: The rapid development of communication technologies and social media has enabled universities to collaborate more easily, making networking a practical necessity for the global Jesuit mission.
- Jesuit Mission and Governance: The universal nature of the Jesuit mission has been reinforced through recent General Congregations (GCs), which emphasise collaboration and networking as essential tools for advancing the Jesuit educational mission. In 1995, GC 34 recognised the need for new global and regional networks to take more significant advantage of its potential and apostolic impacts as an international apostolic body. GC 35 (2008) encouraged Jesuit governance to explore more effective ways of fostering networking. GC 36, in particular, underscores networks' importance in mobilising resources and transcending geographic and institutional boundaries. It also calls on Fr. General and his councillors to study the

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[1] The full article has been submitted for publication in an academic journal.

governance of Jesuit networks as networking has been promoted to enhance collaboration (CG. 36. Decree 2, n.16).

Despite significant progress in establishing a global Jesuit Higher Education Network, the article contends that it has yet to evolve into a fully functioning system. In many regions, the coordination between the Jesuit higher education networks and the corresponding regional conferences of Jesuit provincials still needs to be improved. This lack of articulation is primarily due to the relatively recent creation of the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU) and most regional networks, which have only existed for a few years. As a result, these networks are still in the early stages of development, struggling to establish strong governance structures, clear communication channels, and effective collaboration frameworks across institutions. The challenge lies in bridging institutional and regional differences while fostering deeper alignment with Jesuit provincial leadership to ensure these networks fully realize their potential. As General Congregation emphasized, " GC 36 requests that Father General study the governance of Jesuit networks and other forms of ministry which extend beyond a Province or Conference. As networking has been promoted to enhance collaboration inside and outside the Society, it is necessary to reflect on how and at what level of governance the Society can exercise its responsibility for Jesuit networks. In the same way, the Society should develop models of governance appropriate to ministries that are global in their mission and service. " (CG 36, Decree 2, N°16).

Unlike traditional bureaucratic organisations, Di Trolio explains that Jesuit university networks operate in non-hierarchical, trust-based models. These networks, organised regionally and globally under the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU), facilitate collaboration, foster shared learning, and enable member institutions to address educational and social justice challenges collectively.

The networks' primary purposes include:

- Responding to regional and global challenges.
- Enhancing internationalisation through shared research and training.
- Building social capital and institutional capacity.
- Promoting shared best practices across member universities.

2. What are Jesuit university networks, and when is it appropriate to create them?

Jesuit university networks operate under the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU), founded in 2018 and coordinates the global network of Jesuit higher education institutions. This network includes six regional associations (see image 1): the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) for Asia Pacific, North America, Africa and Madagascar; the Kircher Network for Europe and the Near East; the Jesuit Higher Education

Association South Asia (JEHASA), and AUSJAL for Latin America and the Caribbean. The International Association of Jesuit Business Schools and Jesuit Engineering Schools are also linked to the IAJU.

IMAGE 1
Global Jesuit Higher Education Network System
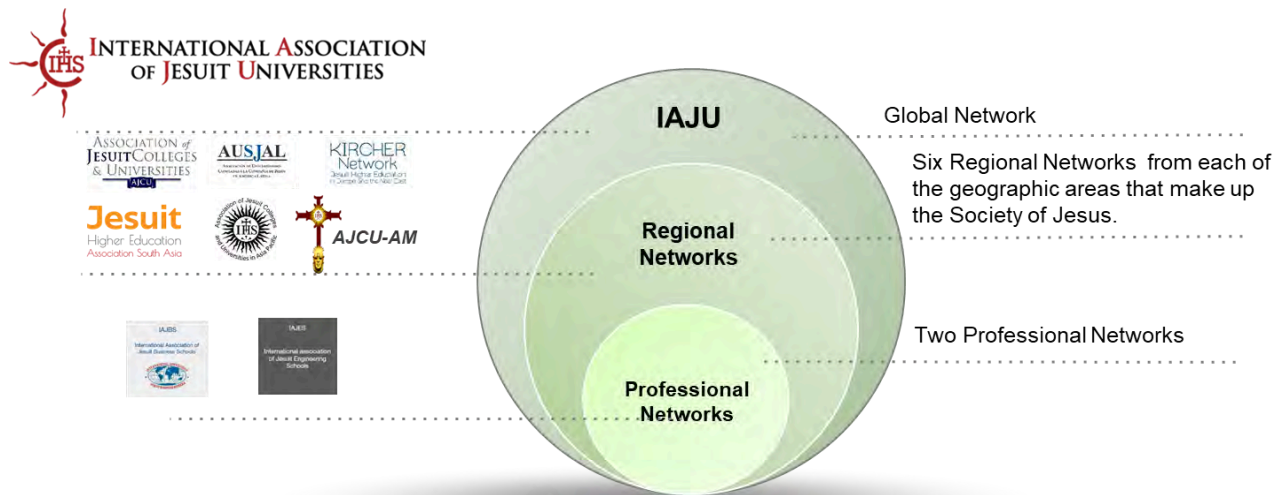
Source: Author's own design using the network's information and charters.

As a global network encompassing approximately 177 Jesuit institutions worldwide (see image 2, the IAJU's primary mission is to foster cooperation across Jesuit institutions, helping them address common challenges while advancing their shared goals, particularly those related to education and social justice.

In the case of the Kircher Network, as a regional association belonging to the IAJU, its mission is to strengthen academic collaboration, the Jesuit identity, and the sense of shared apostolic mission among our member institutions in all aspects of academic life, and the communities within which our institutions operate.

Image 2
Map of Jesuit Higher Education Networks

Source: IAJU Webpage. https://iaju.org/

The concept of networking was not always prominent in Jesuit institutions. In 1999, when AUSJAL transitioned from an association to a network, there was confusion about what "network" meant. Some associated it with technology, while others likened it to a Christian concept, like a "fishing net" gathering people. Jesuit networks are designed for collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Unlike traditional, hierarchical organisations, these networks are unique because they prioritise horizontal structures and collaboration across institutions. They rely on trust, shared goals, and cross-functional cooperation. However, creating and maintaining these networks is challenging due to the diverse academic cultures, institutional differences, and various disciplinary approaches. This complexity requires time and effort to build relationships and promote effective collaboration.

Despite these challenges, Jesuit university networks are critical because they reinforce the identity and mission of Jesuit institutions. They serve as tools for fulfilling their educational and apostolic mission, with their value rooted in the ability to unite institutions in projects that enhance their shared goals. The combined efforts of these networks often lead to results greater than the sum of individual contributions.

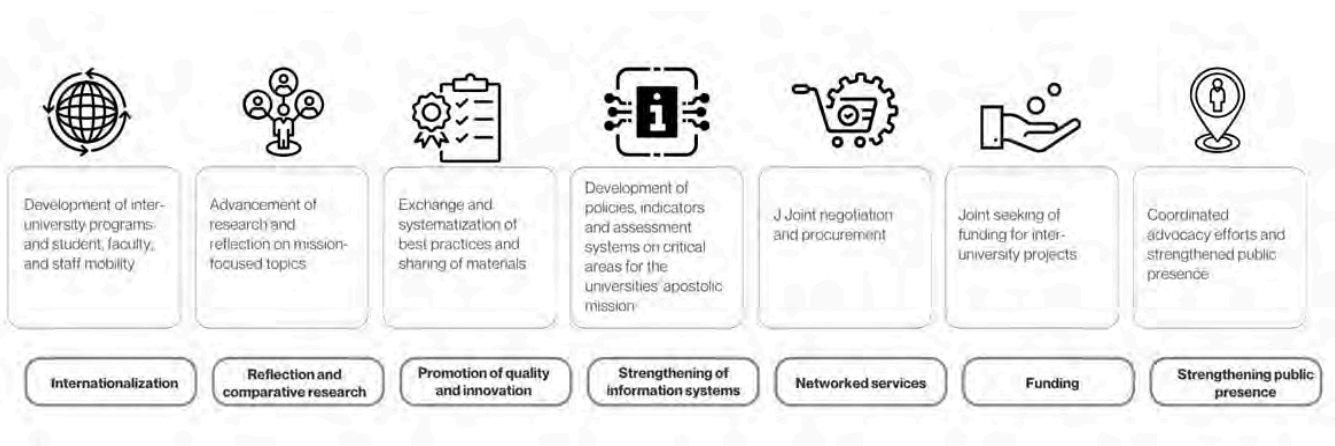**What purposes do Jesuit Higher Education Networks serve?**

Jesuit university networks engage in collaborative projects across various domains, including education, research, public outreach, and management. Table 1 below summarises typical

joint projects categorised into seven areas. Not all networks implement these initiatives; the scope and scale of projects depend on the network's strength, consolidation, and agency level.Jesuit higher education networks serve multiple essential functions:

- **Addressing Challenges:** They provide a framework for responding to regional and global challenges through collective action.
- **Enhancing Internationalisation:** By facilitating inter-university training and comparative research, these networks are crucial tools for internationalisation.
- **Strengthening Capacities:** They bolster institutional capacities while preserving the autonomy of individual universities.
- **Building Social Capital:** These networks enhance the university's social capital, foster a sense of belonging, and expand institutional horizons.
- **Promoting Shared Learning:** Institutions benefit from each other's best practices, methodologies, and operational approaches, leading to shared learning.
- **Leveraging Synergies:** They enable the realisation of synergies and economies of scale, particularly in management areas.
- **Reinforcing Identity:** Networks contribute to a unified public image for universities and centres associated with the Society of Jesus.
- **Expanding Impact:** They enhance local institutions' regional and international visibility and importance.
- **Accessing Funding:** Networks often have better access to funding agencies, facilitating financial support for joint initiatives.

Table 1

Main projects and initiatives developed by Jesuit University Networks

Development of inter-university programs and student, faculty, and staff mobility	Advancement of research and reflection on mission-focused topics	Exchange and systematization of best practices and sharing of materials	Development of policies, indicators and assessment systems on critical areas for the universities' apostolic mission	J Joint negotiation and procurement	Joint seeking of funding for inter-university projects	Coordinated advocacy efforts and strengthened public presence
Internationalization	Reflection and comparative research	Promotion of quality and innovation	Strengthening of information systems	Networked services	Funding	Strengthening public presence

Source: Author's own design using the network's information and charters.

However, networks have limitations. If not carefully managed, they can fall short of expectations, wasting resources and diminishing confidence. Success depends on cultural, socio-economic, and institutional factors, as well as strategy, governance, and incentives. Each network requires a tailored, context-specific approach rather than a one-size-fits-all model to succeed and make a meaningful impact.

3.   Challenges and Risks of Jesuit Networks

This section dives into the practical difficulties that Jesuit university networks face. Di Trolio outlines five major areas of challenge:

- Diversity of Institutions: Jesuit universities vary significantly in size, capacity, and strategic priorities, complicating joint efforts. Balancing the different needs of institutions requires strong listening, leadership, and negotiation skills.
- Limited Resources: Networks often need help with both human and financial resources. Di Trolio stresses the importance of aligning project ambitions with available resources to maintain work capacities, which can lead to failed success and disillusionment.
- Political Will and Leadership: Networks depend heavily on the support of university leaders. The article points out the need for strong institutional commitment, particularly in the early stages of network development when legitimacy is still established. Without this, networks struggle to gain traction and momentum.
- Governance and Coordination: Jesuit networks' complexity requires careful articulation and governance. Coordinating with other Jesuit bodies, such as the Society of Jesus and its regional leadership, is delicate. Networks must also establish clear accountability structures to ensure transparency and effectiveness.
- Institutional Buy-In: For these networks to succeed, participating universities must demonstrate a political commitment to collaboration. This requires their leadership to foster an environment that encourages active participation by academics and staff.

4.   Lessons and Best Practices

The paper concludes by synthesising the critical lessons learned from developing and operating Jesuit university networks. She outlines several best practices essential for success:

- **Clear Objectives and Results:** Networks must identify and pursue high-impact projects that add value to the Jesuit mission. These projects should involve as many institutions as possible while feasible within the network's resource constraints. The

focus should be on a few strategic initiatives rather than overextending resources across numerous minor projects.

- **Inclusive Collaboration**: Not all universities can participate in every project, but it is vital to ensure that smaller or less-resourced institutions are not excluded.
- **Political Will and Transparent Leadership:** Networks' success depends on sustained support from university leadership. Regular communication and accountability between networks and their member institutions are crucial. Moreover, empowering participants through leadership roles strengthens ownership and commitment to network goals.
- **Governance and Management:** Effective coordination is key. Networks need dedicated teams to manage projects, encourage collaboration, and maintain accountability. A decentralised management model, "coordinated decentralisation," allows for flexibility while ensuring collective progress.
- **Trust Building:** Networks function on relationships; trust among members is fundamental. Building trust takes time and is closely tied to participants' academic and managerial reputations. Dr. Di Trolio stresses the importance of creating opportunities for personal connection among network members to foster a sense of community.
- **Effective Communication:** Clear and consistent communication—internally among network members and externally to the broader academic and Jesuit communities—is necessary to ensure the networks' visibility and impact.
- **Valuing Diversity:** Jesuit institutions differ widely in size, resources, and regional context. The most successful networks effectively recognise and manage these differences, ensuring that collaboration benefits large, well-resourced universities and smaller, less-prominent institutions.