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A Strategic Vision for Jesuit Higher Education Networks

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Abstract

This article provides a strategic analysis of networking in Jesuit higher education, grounded in the operational realities of Jesuit universities. It examines the formation, challenges, and best practices for fostering sustainable collaboration within these networks. The article contends that Jesuit networks are essential tools for advancing the mission of Jesuit higher education, offering insights that contribute to broader discussions on the strategic role of academic networks in promoting mission-driven education and global cooperation. The paper is divided into three sections: an overview of the rationale for establishing these networks, an exploration of the risks and critical challenges they face—including resource limitations and governance complexities—and practical strategies for enhancing effective collaboration.

1. Context and Premises of Jesuit University Networks

Over the past two decades, Jesuit university networks have expanded significantly while existing ones have been transformed and strengthened. New networks like the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU), the Kircher Network, the International Association of Jesuit Business Schools, and the International Association of Jesuit Engineering Schools have emerged. In contrast, others, such as the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU—North America) and the Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America and the Caribbean (AUSJAL), have gained increased institutional strength and reach. What accounts for this growth?

Several factors have driven this expansion. Although this article does not seek to explain this expansion fully, three factors can be highlighted. First, globalization has increased the need for collaboration across Jesuit works, sectors, and provinces. While globalization brings many advantages, it has deepened social and environmental issues in various countries and regions. The resulting interdependence has made many of the societal challenges Jesuit institutions face—poverty, inequality, exclusion, migration, and climate change, among others—both regional and global in scope. In response, the Society of Jesus has fostered collaborative networks, particularly in the social sector. For example, in 1980, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., then Superior General, created the Jesuit Refugee

Service as a global response to the refugee crisis. The rapid development of communication technologies and social media has made collaboration more accessible and practical. As the Jesuit mission demands greater cooperation, these technological advances have enabled more dynamic and widespread networking.¹

Second, pursuing quality education and impactful research in higher education depends on academic collaboration through national and international networks. The growing internationalization of higher education underscores this trend. A Jesuit university that fails to participate in such networks risks becoming insular, lacking the global perspective needed in today's academic landscape.

Finally, while the Society of Jesus's mission has always been universal, the emphatic call of the most recent General Congregations (GCs) for greater collaboration and networking stands out. Thus, in 1995, GC 34 recognized 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 (2016) reinforced this, advocating for networks to strengthen identity and mission, and calling for a study of their impact and growth. GC 36 highlighted the usefulness of networking in responding to the mission better, stating, “[t]hey make it possible to mobilize human and material resources in support of the mission, and to go beyond national borders and the boundaries of

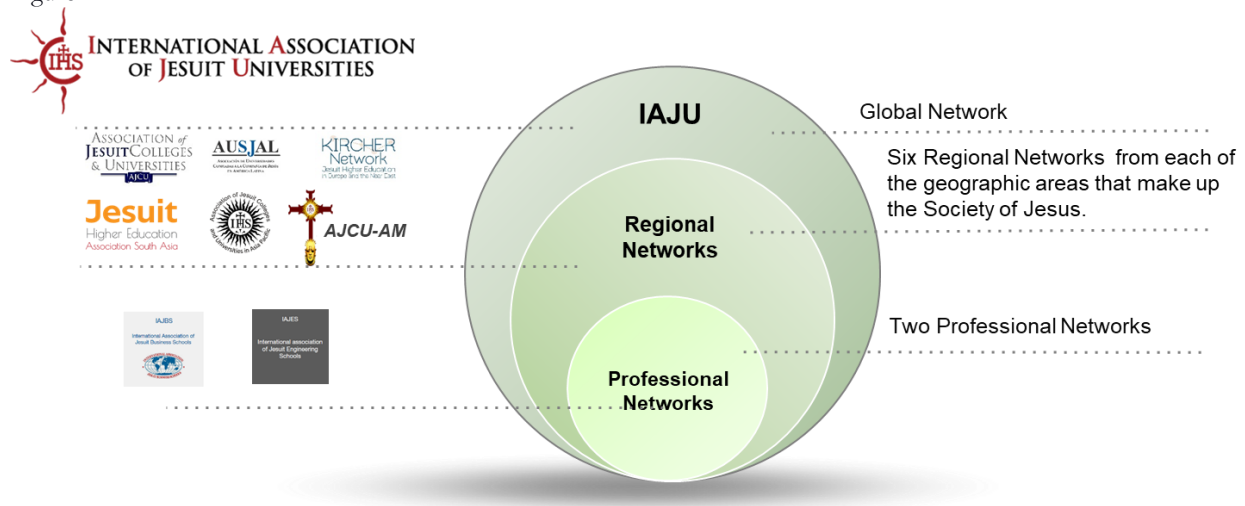
Provinces and Regions.”² It also calls on Fr. General and his councilors to study the governance of Jesuit networks, as networking has been promoted to enhance collaboration (GC 36, Decree 2, s. 16).³

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

The global network of Jesuit higher education operates under the umbrella of the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU), which comprises six regional associations (see Figure 1): the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities–Asia Pacific (AJCU-AP); the

Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities–North America (AJCU); the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities–Africa and Madagascar (AJCU-AM); the Kircher Network, representing Jesuit higher education in Europe and the Near East; the Jesuit Higher Education Association South Asia (JEHASA); and the Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America and the Caribbean (AUSJAL). Likewise, the International Association of Jesuit Business Schools and the International Association of Jesuit Engineering Schools are two professional Jesuit associations linked to the IAJU.

Figure 1.



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

Founded in 2018, the IAJU serves as the international advisory and coordinating body to the Secretariat of Jesuit Higher Education and, through it, to the Father General and his Assistants in matters concerning higher education and the intellectual apostolate. As a global network encompassing approximately 177 Jesuit institutions worldwide (see Figure 2),

the IAJU is a platform for collaboration and exchange among Jesuit universities, colleges, and educational institutions. Its mission is to foster cooperation across the global Jesuit network, addressing shared challenges while advancing the educational and social justice goals rooted in the Jesuit tradition.⁴

Figure 2. Map of Jesuit Higher Education Networks



Source: [Printable Map](#), International Association of Jesuits Universities—IAJU

Today, “networking” is a common term in Jesuit institutions, but this was not always true. In 1999, for example, when AUSJAL evolved from an association into a network of networks, it was necessary to clarify what “network” meant. For some, the word brought to mind computer networks, while for others, it evoked the image of a fishing net—an analogy more aligned with Christian identity. Jesuit university networks, like fishing nets, are designed to gather and connect, but in this case, through voluntary exchange of knowledge and collaboration.

Networks are a unique type of organization with a complex operational model. They act as platforms for people and institutions, characterized by horizontal structures and cross-functional collaboration. Unlike bureaucratic organizations, networks prioritize a non-hierarchical, people-centered approach, relying on trust, active listening, and shared goals rather than formal directives.

Establishing and sustaining international networks within Jesuit higher education is inherently complex due to the vast array of cultural contexts, distinct academic traditions, varied disciplinary approaches, and diverse governance structures across institutions. While

this diversity enriches the network, it also introduces additional layers of complexity to the development process. Consequently, significant time and effort are required to foster relationships and implement effective mechanisms for collaboration, ensuring that the network functions cohesively and productively across regional and global contexts.

Given these challenges, *why continue to build international networks in Jesuit higher education, primarily when other prestigious and well-resourced networks exist?* The answer lies in their role in reinforcing identity and advancing mission. Jesuit networks are not ends in themselves but tools for fulfilling the apostolic mission of Jesuit universities. Unlike other university networks, these are specifically designed to support Jesuit institutions in initiatives and projects directly aligned with their Jesuit identity and mission. Their unique value comes from their capacity to contribute to the renewal and fulfillment of the Jesuit university mission. Through effective networking, the combined efforts of member institutions can yield results more significant than the sum of their contributions, illustrating that 2+2 can indeed be more than four.

However, like all tools, networks have limitations. They are not a panacea and can sometimes fall short, resulting in wasted resources and diminished confidence in their effectiveness. A network's success depends on various factors, such as cultural and socio-economic context, people, resources, and timing. Grounded in Ignatian identity and supported by the right strategy, governance, incentives, and clear outcomes that benefit all members, Jesuit university networks can drive meaningful change and advance their mission. Similarly, attempting to replicate the structure of an existing international higher education network is often unrealistic, as there is no one-size-fits-all model. While lessons from other experiences are valuable, each network needs a custom-designed model tailored to its specific context and accepted by its member institutions.

1.2 What purposes do Jesuit Higher Education Networks serve?

Jesuit higher education networks serve multiple essential functions:⁵

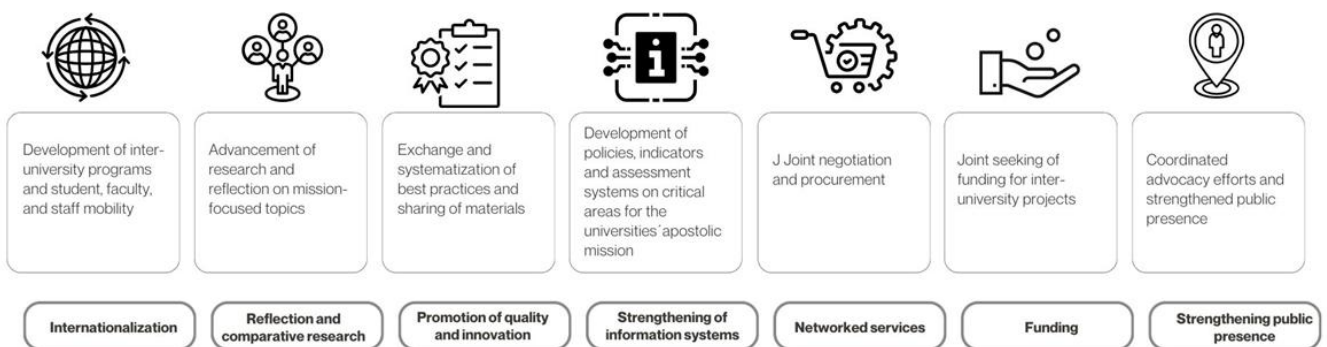
- **Addressing Challenges:** They provide a framework for responding to regional and global challenges through collective action.
- **Enhancing Internationalization:** By facilitating inter-university training and comparative research, these networks are crucial tools for internationalization.
- **Strengthening 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 realization of synergies and economies of scale, particularly in management areas.
- **Reinforcing Identity:** Networks contribute to a unified public image for universities and centers 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.

Jesuit university networks engage in collaborative projects across various domains, including education, research, public outreach, and management. Figure 3 summarizes typical joint projects categorized 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.⁶

Figure 3. Main projects and initiatives developed by Jesuit University networks



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

2. Challenges and Risks of Jesuit University Networks

The second section examines the key challenges and risks Jesuit university networks face. Table 1 below summarizes these challenges and risks, categorized into five main areas.

Table 1. Challenges and Risks of Jesuit University Networks

CHALLENGES:	RISKS:
Clear and concrete objectives and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambiguous, non-feasible objectives that do not add value; Inability to manage diversity/differences between institutions. • Dispersion and loss of resources. • Lack of direction; paralysis.
Availability of resources, inputs, and capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imbalance between resources and objectives. Overly ambitious goals. • Burnout of network academic peers and managers due to lack of support. • Some universities may focus only on what they can gain from the network and not on what they can contribute.
Monitoring and accompaniment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of direction and disinterest from members due to lack of accompaniment. • Paralysis.
Political will and leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of political will among members. A network without stakeholders. • Weak leadership or leadership contrary to the Ignatian values.
Articulation, coordination, and governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear who leads and whom the network serves. • Risk of capture. • Disconnection between the network's goals and demands and the governance structure of the Society of Jesus.

Source: Author's design.

2.1 Defining clear and achievable objectives and results: The Iron Law of Contexts

The contexts in which the 189 Jesuit universities operate in more than 50 countries are highly complex and differ markedly from one another. Depending on their capacities and strengths, each institution seeks to fulfill its apostolic mission and the inescapable and complex demands of quality information and research in increasingly competitive and changing contexts. At the same time, to fulfill its mission, the Jesuit university has to be economically sustainable. Maintaining a balance among these three dimensions—apostolic mission, academic excellence, and financial stability—is the main task of the university authorities.

Networks exist to serve universities. Hence, their first major challenge is understanding the diversity among Jesuit universities, especially in their capacities, strategic lines, organization, and governance structure, as well as in the regulations and characteristics of the respective higher education markets.

Given the diversity of Jesuit universities, networks must be able to identify viable joint projects and initiatives with clear and concrete objectives that add value and involve the most significant number of institutions. The typical project or initiative is the node of networking. Those of us who collaborate in formulating international inter-university projects know that this task requires listening, leadership and negotiation. Networks can fail to define objectives and outcomes. When this happens,

the network loses momentum, becomes paralyzed and eventually disperses.

2.2 Availability of Resources and Capabilities: The Iron Law of Limited Resources

The second challenge for Jesuit university networks is operating and developing projects within the constraints of available human and financial resources. Although universities and regions differ in resource levels and funding access, these resources are generally limited.

University networks must plan projects with achievable and sustainable goals using the resources and capabilities at their disposal. Defining ambitious joint projects with oversized goals can be counterproductive. Many great inter-university projects in Jesuit higher education remain unexecuted, disillusioning network members due to a perceived lack of support. Therefore, aligning goals, resources, and timelines for projects or initiatives is crucial.

2.3 Political Will and Leadership: Commitment to Collaborative Networking

Jesuit university networks consist of institutions, academics, professionals engaged in collaborative efforts, and central teams from the presidency and executive secretariats. All four actors require support, capacity, and leadership, particularly in the Ignatian tradition.⁷

For a network to function effectively, the political will of the member universities and institutions is crucial. Specifically, the support of rectors for the network and its collaborative efforts is indispensable. This political will is especially vital during the network's startup phase when it has yet to gain legitimacy through successful value-adding initiatives. While it is valid that authorities cannot compel academics and staff to participate in a network, even a Jesuit one, it is equally valid that members are unlikely to engage if they perceive a lack of interest or support from their leaders.

The risk is that the network may suffer from a shortage of strategic stakeholders. The challenge, particularly in the network's early stages, is to escape the "chicken and egg" problem. Without political will, there is a lack of available academics and practitioners, which hampers project development and the network's

legitimacy. The third section will explore further lessons on this issue.

2.4 Articulation, Coordination, and Governance of Networks: Strengthening the Universal Body for a Shared Mission

As discussed previously, the past two decades have seen significant growth in the creation and transformation of Jesuit university networks. The challenge for these networks and the governance of the Society of Jesus is to clearly define their articulation with member institutions, the governance structure of the Society, and other local and international Jesuit networks. It is essential to clarify whom the network serves and who is accountable. The leadership structure needs to be defined, including how leaders are chosen and to whom they are accountable.

Beyond the governance structure, networks face the challenge of ensuring effective coordination and collaboration, including funding, with provinces, regional conferences, and other Jesuit apostolic networks.⁸ This articulation is complex and requires openness and a commitment to viewing ourselves as collaborators in a shared mission. For skeptics, in light of the magnitude of the mission and limited resources, we must question whether it is worthwhile to be constrained by organizational boundaries. As believers, we should ask whether we genuinely think Our Lord values organizational limits and the small achievements of each apostolic work or network. Do we believe that, in the face of a greater good, Our Lord concerns Himself with organizational boundaries and the minor achievements of each organization?

3. Jesuit University Networks: Lessons Learned

This final section synthesizes the key lessons and best practices that have emerged from creating and operating Jesuit university networks. The following factors are critical for ensuring their effectiveness.

3.1 Clear Objectives and Results

- Identifying achievable joint projects that add value to the mission of most Jesuit institutions while professionally enriching participants is crucial for

building trust and fostering collaboration.

- Networks should focus on concrete projects in areas aligned with Jesuit universities' educational apostolate and identity. Importantly, networks do not replace university leadership's core functions or responsibilities in renewing the Ignatian mission.
- A key lesson is prioritizing a limited number of high-impact projects that benefit as many institutions as possible rather than spreading resources thinly across multiple initiatives; focusing on a few strategic projects maximizes impact and strengthens collaboration.

3.2 Inclusive Collaboration

- Not all universities or centers will participate in every project, especially in young networks. However, networks must strive for equitable and meaningful inclusion of diverse institutions and individuals. Flexibility and adaptability are essential to accommodate the rich diversity across Jesuit higher education institutions.

3.3 Resources and Capabilities

- Balancing the member institution's vision and expectations about the network with the available human and financial resources is crucial. Projects should be feasible, sustainable, and tailored to the network's and its members' capacities. Since resources are often limited, a gradual approach—focusing on concrete, achievable projects that demonstrate the benefits of collaboration—has proven to be an effective strategy.

3.4 Political Will and Leadership

- The support of rectors and deans is fundamental to the network's success. In return, networks must ensure regular accountability and transparent communication with university authorities. While participation in network activities is voluntary, universities are responsible for their commitments once approved.

- Decision-making should balance top-down strategic directives with bottom-up considerations from network members. This participatory approach reduces power conflicts and fosters a sense of ownership. It is also essential to recognize the time and effort participants dedicate to joint projects and empower them through leadership roles.
- Network leadership should be characterized by active listening, shared responsibilities, and the ability to foster collaboration. Identifying and training individuals with leadership, negotiation, resilience, and teamwork skills is critical for ensuring the network's long-term success.

3.5 Management, Articulation, and Governance

- Effective network coordination requires a dedicated central team, the size of which depends on the network's scope and complexity. Coordination among various groups and projects within the network is essential to ensure collective outcomes. Decentralizing leadership while maintaining efficient coordination, known as "coordinated decentralization," is a successful management approach.
- Networks must also define their institutional relationships with the Society of Jesus's governance structures at both regional and global levels, including coordination with regional conferences, the Secretariat for Higher Education, and the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU).
- Additionally, fostering collaboration with other Jesuit and non-Jesuit networks is essential for avoiding duplication of efforts and leveraging synergies. Networks should explore such collaborations even before achieving complete consolidation.

3.6 Follow-up and Accompaniment

- Effective planning requires pragmatic agreements among member institutions to set precise, achievable, and sustainable objectives. The central

coordination must provide continuous guidance, advice, and monitoring for project teams. Using a structured methodology for project formulation and follow-up increases the likelihood of success by clearly defining activities, results, and timelines.

3.7 Trust-Building

- Networks are fundamentally about relationships between people. Trust among members is critical and requires confidence in each other's academic and managerial skills and commitment to meeting project goals. Building this level of trust takes time and is closely tied to the academic reputation of the participants and their institutions. Creating opportunities for human connection is essential for establishing collaborative solid bonds.

3.8 Effective Communication

- A network can only function with clear and consistent communication. This includes ongoing dialogue among institutions, central coordination, and network members. Effective external communication with other Jesuit networks, the Church, and the wider academic world strengthens the network's presence and impact.

3.9 Valuing Diversity and Managing Asymmetries

- Acknowledging and managing the differences and asymmetries among member institutions is critical. Jesuit higher education institutions vary widely in size, context, and language, often creating significant disparities. Larger universities may feel constrained by networking, believing they could achieve more independently or with similarly prominent institutions. Smaller institutions may hesitate to participate due to limited resources, fearing larger counterparts will overshadow their contributions.
- However, recent trends show a growing willingness among larger universities to lead networks and strategic projects and an increased commitment from smaller

institutions to engage in collaborative efforts. The most significant challenge for network management lies in valuing and managing these differences.

Collaboration among institutions with varied capacities is not just a matter of generosity; it ensures mutual benefit through shared knowledge and resources.

Conclusions

Jesuit university networks offer a powerful platform for diverse institutions to collaborate toward common goals. Their strategic role lies in their ability to advance the mission of Jesuit higher education by fostering collaboration, internationalization, and a shared commitment to social justice. Through these networks, Jesuit universities can address global and regional challenges, enhance their academic and operational capacities, and reinforce their Ignatian identity.

Despite the complexities and challenges inherent in building and sustaining these networks—ranging from governance issues to resource constraints—their value as tools for mission-driven universities cannot be overstated. By pooling resources, sharing best practices, and fostering a culture of collaboration, Jesuit networks enable institutions to achieve outcomes that exceed individual contributions.

Key lessons from successful networks emphasize the importance of clearly defined objectives, adequate funding, inclusive collaboration, committed leadership, and effective governance. Building trust, ensuring consistent communication, and managing institutional diversity are essential for fostering resilient and impactful networks. When these factors align, Jesuit university networks can significantly amplify Jesuit education's regional and global mission and its local impact.

As Jesuit higher education networks expand and evolve, the Society of Jesus should examine the coordination between these networks, the provinces, and the provincial regional conferences. Strengthening these articulations is essential to ensuring these networks continue advancing the Jesuit mission in an increasingly interconnected and complex global context. HJE

Endnotes

¹ Asociación de Universidades Confiadas a la Compañía de Jesús en América Latina y el Caribe (AUSJAL), “Redes Educativas de la Compañía de Jesús,” *Carta de Ausjal* no. 45 (2016), <https://www.ausjal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Carta-AUSJAL-45.pdf>.

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³ Society of Jesus, GC36, Decree 2, 16, https://jesuits.eu/images/docs/GC_36_Documents.pdf.

⁴ International Association of Jesuits Universities, *Strategic Plan* (2028), <https://iaju.org/about/strategic-plan/>.

⁵ Daniel Villanueva, S.J., “Redes Jesuitas y Misión,” *Sal Terrae* 103 (2015), https://jesuit.network/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/st_2015_04-02.pdf.

⁶ International Networking in the Society of Jesus: Challenges from a Universal Mission, Conference at Boston College, April 28-30, 2012, https://jesuit.network/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2012_Conference_International_Jesuit_Networking-1.pdf.

⁷ Chris Lowney, “On Jesuit Networking,” Jesuit Network (International Networking in the Society of Jesus: Challenges from a Universal Mission, Conference at Boston College, April 28-30, 2012), 1, https://jesuit.network/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Lowney_Jesuit_Networking.pdf.

⁸ There is also a need to foster cooperation with non-Jesuit organizations.