

Case study: Saint Joseph University
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Founded in 1875 by the Jesuits, Saint Joseph University (SJU) is a Lebanese private university with four main campuses based in Beirut. With approximately 9,800 students, 1,800 faculty members and 460 administrative staff,¹ it is the largest private university in Lebanon among the institutions that teach a foreign language. In 2010, it had twelve faculties, fourteen specialized institutes, five schools, and nine libraries. It has also begun implementing a geographical decentralization policy with the creation of three regional academic centers outside Beirut and an international center in Dubai.

According to its Charter, SJU espouses the dual mission of vocational training and cultural education. Vocational training has the goal of enabling students “to make useful contributions to society,” while the university’s cultural mission is to promote humanitarian and Christian values, but without discrimination on religious basis. Thus, the Charter adopts a liberal and pluralist ideological vision. However, SJU remains in practice a university for people primarily from the upper-middle class, predominantly Christian and French-speaking.

In terms of university governance, the Charter favors participation and autonomy. In reality, however, governance is very centralized. At the top of the decision-making hierarchy is the university president who combines all powers and prepares the decisions to be executed by the different services of SJU’s Central Administration. The president is appointed by the Society of Jesus from three candidates nominated by the University Council for a five-year term. He is assisted by the Board of Vice-Presidents, the directors of the services of the Central Administration and the Restricted Council. The governing body representing the different SJU institutions is the University Council, composed of the deans of faculties, the directors of institutes and schools and the campus administrators. The Strategic Council brings together academic, administrative and political personalities and top executives from Lebanon and abroad who meet twice a year. On a faculty level, the faculty councils include the deans, institute directors, department heads and elected representatives of the teaching staff.

SJU is a model for self-financing: 95 percent of its resources come from tuition fees; grants from the European Community and the French state do not exceed €800,000. In terms of allocating funds, there is again a discrepancy between the Charter and reality. While the former prescribes the autonomy of the various governing bodies, in practice the distribution of funding is very centralized and most of the university service and academic units do not dispose with annual budgets set in advance. Funding is received on a project basis after the Vice-President, Administration reviews each initiative and authorizes funds, subject to budget availability.

Participation of faculty members in university governance does not go beyond the faculty, institute or school level. Teachers’ scope of action includes the election of their delegates and section presidents and participation in academic tasks such as adapting or changing study programs. At SJU, the majority—80 percent—of teachers are part-time contract instructors. Permanent faculty members represent 20 percent of the faculty body, only half of whom are full-time. Even permanent faculty are not guaranteed employment stability—their contracts are up for renewal every three years. At the same time, the teaching load, especially for contract instructors, is high and salaries are low (compared to other Lebanese universities). Many teachers have to work an additional job to supplement their income. However, the prestige of

¹ These figures are from 2008.

SJU as a quality institution of higher education and its climate of academic freedom, flexibility and autonomy are appealing to many.

Students' participation in SJU governance is also limited. They have a say in the planning of their studies, but they are not represented in neither faculty or institute councils, nor in the University Council. They have an elected representative who plays the role of an intermediary between students, teachers and the administration "in order to improve programs. . .ways of working and exam regulations" (SJU Charter 1975, Articles 44-45). But many students are unsure what this position really entails, and do not seek the help of the representative whenever they have academic or administrative grievances or want to appeal a decision. Students see teaching evaluations as an indirect form of participation. At the same time, they also acknowledge that evaluations are often too long and complicated to fill out properly and, furthermore, more often than not the evaluations are not taken into consideration in the assessment of teachers' academic performance.

In 2003, SJU introduced the LMD (license/master's/doctorate) system, based on the French higher education model and on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). This allowed the university to restructure its training. This system makes possible the pooling of resources between the different faculties and institutes, the common use of facilities and equipment and the transition between programs. It also allows access to multidisciplinary and multilingual education. But according to some students, it works better in some disciplines than others—it is less applicable in a field like law, for instance.

The SJU Charter also grants a prominent place to "cultural and scientific research," which it deems "necessary for the training of students and the continuing professional development of instructors" (Article 3). According to the Charter, researchers have autonomy "in gathering their teams and framing their projects" (Article 7). Despite this valorization, however, research remains underdeveloped at SJU. One of the reasons for this, emphasized by the interviewed faculty members, is course overload (five courses per semester, ten subjects to teach per academic year) in addition to the required hours of administrative work. This takes up most of the teachers' energy and leaves very little time for research, despite the fact that published research is an important requirement for promotion to a higher academic rank. In response, the status of the teacher-researcher was introduced at SJU reducing the number of teaching hours from 220 to 120 per year, and the position of a Vice-President, Research was created. The university's Research Council also established a general program of research topics based on two unifying themes: the safety of individuals and populations and the environment and heritage. Projects are funded in accordance with how closely they comply with these themes. But funding for research is another major issue: SJU can devote only about 2 percent of its overall budget to research. Thus, very few projects receive adequate funding, although the tools and infrastructure for research are in place: SJU has good libraries, updated documentation and qualified personnel.

In terms of campus life, most students find the university environment socially and culturally diverse where they have the opportunity to expand their personal and professional networks and meet people from other regions and religions. Nevertheless, political divisions are a problem, especially on some campuses, and many of the interviewed students denounced the negative effects of political tensions and the clannish mentality they promote. Faculty members, on the other hand, regret the lack of community life on campus, which some attribute to what they see as a prevailing culture of individualism at SJU as well as to the overall university structure and functioning, which does not foster a sense of belonging to the institution.