

ANNEX 4

SWOT Analysis

Key issues tackled in the focus groups with the members of the AVEPRO Board of Directors and Scientific Council

► Discussion of the BOARD OF DIRECTORS - Rome, 30/11/2018

The focus group was organised in the framework of the ENQA review process that the Agency just started. The inputs that the members of the BoD provided are intended to be the cornerstones of the SWOT analysis, and the preliminary thoughts of the overall Agency's assessment.

AVEPRO decided to adopt a participatory method so to foster a genuine engagement in all its components/bodies, as well as a shared sense of ownership about the change process it is going through.

Participants were initially asked to be creative in reflecting about the features and functions of the "Agency that they would like to have".

The available time was indeed tight to cover all questions, especially given the rich inputs that participants provided to the discussion.

The "used" prompts were:

STRENGTHS / WEAKNESSES:

1. What does our Agency perform particularly well?
2. What are AVEPRO's distinctive features compared to other Agencies?
3. Is the Agency acknowledged and appreciated by its stakeholders?
4. Do Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions consult the Agency in its capacity of supporting and accompanying them, not only for promoting and evaluating Quality?
5. What resources (also human resources) are partly or totally missing in the Agency?

OPPORTUNITIES / THREATS

6. What are the Agency's visible/manifest areas for further development? What about the most evident critical areas?
7. What could we improve with regards to (a) the Agency's evaluation processes, (b) the promotion of Quality Assurance, and (c) the services provided to Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions?
8. Who/what are the Agency's most relevant stakeholders? How and to what extent could their (missed) involvement in strengthening the system's Quality culture generate opportunities or threats?
9. What kind of obstacles might result from the missing collaboration with other national Agencies?
10. How could we avoid or reduce the risk that QA becomes just a formal bureaucratic duty, ignoring the key underlying cultural development?
11. What challenges may the Agency face, as a result of the current reform process started by the *Veritatis Gaudium* and affecting the Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions?

Key points of attention:

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH/FOLLOW-UP

- The 2nd ENQA review must focus on the improvements, developments and possible bottlenecks encountered since the first SAR and review process, which led to the Agency's full membership in ENQA. → OPPORTUNITY

- Quality is much more than accreditation: it has to do with organisational culture and people's attitudes. → OPPORTUNITY + THREAT
- AVEPRO built from scratch the QA system in the Ecclesiastical Academic system. The achievements reached so far show an outstanding capacity to promote the Quality culture. As a matter of fact, the notion of Quality Assurance was firstly introduced thanks to the Agency, promoting a new understanding of Quality. → STRENGTH
- Among the Agency's great achievements, it is worth mentioning the strong support to the Quality culture and attitude throughout the Ecclesiastical HEI environment. The Agency has been strongly focusing on Quality promotion and follow-up (understanding Quality as a constant process) which has become part of the its strategic planning. Many agencies are not so committed when it comes to follow-up. → STRENGTH
- The Quality approach has implications in terms of capacity to detect the challenges of the Ecclesiastical cultural environment and the demands from the stakeholders (society at large and the students' population). → OPPORTUNITY
- The Quality approach has been implanted on the intercultural approach which is part of the Agency's DNA and allows it to adapt to different cultural and legal systems. → STRENGTH
- The Agency's main "customers" (=the Universities and Faculties) are in general in humanities. This is an interesting difference from the other agencies which mainly deal with scientific HEIs. For ENQA, such a specificity may represent a strength since it would allow to validate the comprehensiveness of the QA approach in specific sets of academic subjects. → OPPORTUNITY
- How is it possible to build networks/alliances to promote QA culture in Europe and beyond? → OPPORTUNITY + THREAT

RESOURCES:

- Available financial resources are not corresponding to the Agency's complex tasks. It is perceived as a "burning issue" which may hinder the Agency's future action. → THREAT
- The use of resources is so effective to achieve the Agency's mandate. → STRENGTH
- The staff is stable and highly competent (both the Secretariat and the President). → STRENGTH
- The involvement of broad and varied groups of experts ensures a highly effective action. → STRENGTH
- Strong policy "to be in service of...", already introduced by Pope Benedict and farther adopted by Pope Francis. With respect to human resources, the notion of "voluntarily contributing to the Agency's work" (unpaid work) is part of the attitude and culture of the Ecclesiastical world – not to pursue a private/hidden agenda, but to accept to be "in service of". Staff and contributors are engaged to pursue the Agency's aims also devoting their time and efforts for a higher set of Values. Whilst this approach is well-rooted in the North-American culture, it can raise doubts in Europe and in other Third Countries. → STRENGTH + OPPORTUNITY

CROSSING BORDERS

- Wind of opportunities: if we look back at the moment when the Holy See seized the great opportunity to join the Bologna Process and to realise a massive reform of its Academic system (also implying the set-up of AVEPRO), it all seems as a "miracle window". Nowadays the present situation in the EU is such that such a radical reform would not be possible at all. → THREAT
- The Agency's action beyond the European borders poses interesting challenges concerning how other jurisdictions can be covered, provided that the Agency's organisation and resources stay the same. → THREAT
- AVEPRO is a respected member of ENQA and is well-reputed in the EU and other continents. Its good reputation is mainly due to its staff's punctuality and competence. Also, AVEPRO's credibility is related to its openness towards other types of agencies outside the Catholic world. → STRENGTH

- Concerning the Agency's action in third countries, there is a risk of "colonising" the local academic systems, adopting a EU-centred approach. AVEPRO needs to respect local cultures, understandings, theologies, systems and legal frameworks. → OPPORTUNITY + THREAT
- Ecclesiastical HEIs must open up to the external context, especially in countries out of Europe and North and Latin America – namely, Africa and Asia. AVEPRO can play an "accompanying role" providing its services to promote and support Quality culture. → OPPORTUNITY
- One big challenge that the Agency has to face when talking about offering its services to other regions in the world concerns the need to recognise the different national systems and frameworks, staying away from "blueprints". AVEPRO needs to keep its adaptability and flexibility that it has been building in the last decade in order to find the best ways to serve the Ecclesiastical HEI and ensuring a sense of ownership. AVEPRO does not have to carry out QA in the same way everywhere. → OPPORTUNITY

ORGANISATION

- The Agency has a special identity, being a worldwide sectoral agency, steering the promotion of Quality Assurance throughout the system. This is an extremely challenging task to be carried out at transnational scale, whilst all other agencies act sectorially or at national level. → OPPORTUNITY
- The Agency has solid roots and applies the thinking of the Church within its mandate. → STRENGTH
- The Scientific Council is a key body whose reflections ought to orientate and steer the Agency's action, also identifying major societal challenges, directions for reform and providing suggestions for further action. The Council is a "working tool" for AVEPRO, based on the idea of "peer collaboration". → STRENGTH + OPPORTUNITY
- Thinking about theological studies, it is indeed challenging to grant coherence between the Quality criteria and the need to keep a clear identity of the study programmes. → OPPORTUNITY + THREAT
- Need to improve the quality and training of the expert panels in the Agency's Evaluation Commissions. → OPPORTUNITY + WEAKNESS
- Among the needed improvements: Quality needs to be embedded in the strategic planning, developing a reasonable and feasible strategic framework. → STRENGTH + OPPORTUNITY

INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

- "Wisdom in Modesty" vis-à-vis the Congregation, not entering into the domain of accreditation of Institutions (which is a prerogative of the CCE). The Agency has always had a humble behaviour towards the Congregation, recognising its own position within the administrative structure. Collaboration with the CCE has always been fruitful and has led to long-lasting achievements at global scale. → STRENGTH
- The Agency is still searching for effective ways to communicate with national bodies. → OPPORTUNITY + THREAT
- The collaboration with the Bishops' Conferences at national level has proved to be an essential step to pursue a twofold objective: (a) to ensure collaboration of local HEIs and the realisation of the Quality Assurance deeds assuring the sense of ownership of the QA process by local ecclesiastical institutions; (b) to provide AVEPRO with the competent and motivated staff who could act locally. → STRENGTH + OPPORTUNITY
- Networking can support a shared ownership of all processes and generate consensus /support among internal stakeholders. This would lead to a greater impact. → OPPORTUNITY
- AVEPRO has not any system of incentives/threats that it can offer the Academic institutions it is evaluating. → WEAKNESS
- For other agencies in other sectors, granting accreditation allows to have access to further funding. In the case of AVEPRO, HEIs are cooperating because "we are part of the same family". CCE and AVEPRO may establish a legal connection regarding accreditation. → OPPORTUNITY

GOVERNANCE AND STAKEHOLDERS

- Students' perceptions about the Agency's role are surprising: the questionnaires are considered as a burden, site visits as an interference in the Faculty's life. AVEPRO is not seen as a partner that can help develop Quality, but as a controller. Much needs to be done to foster change in this attitude, presenting AVEPRO as a qualified partner that can help the University to improve and grow. Also the idea of "being part of the same group" needs to be promoted. →WEAKNESS + OPPORTUNITY
- There should be a different collaboration between AVEPRO and the single HEIs, also in-between site visits. Students only "see" the questionnaires but out-of-context. These are not considered as an input for the University's development. →WEAKNESS + OPPORTUNITY
- Need to share good practices within the Ecclesiastical academic system. →OPPORTUNITY
- Existing, non-national and transversal networks in the Church must be used, no need to reinvent the wheel. Example: collaboration with and within groups (e.g. groups of Jesuits, or Dominicans which have a worldwide presence) at national and international level. Benefits may be generated in terms of cultural and academic development, also QA-wise. →WEAKNESS + OPPORTUNITY

► Discussion of the SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL - Rome, 07/06/2019

The focus group with the Scientific Council was organised in the framework of the ENQA review process, following the appointment of the new SC members. AVEPRO decided to continue to use a participatory method so to foster a genuine engagement in all its components/bodies, as well as a shared sense of ownership about the change process it is going through.

Taking into account the inputs emerged during the discussion with the Board of Directors (November 2018), the Agency Secretariat prepared a set of prompts to further analyse specific matters.

The key starting points for discussion are taken from the results emerged during the focus group involving the members of the AVEPRO's Board of Directors. The addressed key dimensions and prompts were:

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH/ ENHANCEMENT

Prompts:

- To what extent has AVEPRO's understanding of Quality as a constant process become part of its strategic planning?
- What are the Agency's visible areas for further development?
- What about the most evident critical areas?
- Are there new proposals and measures that we might explore to promote the Agency's development? (in terms of services provided to the Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions)
- How could we avoid or reduce the risk that QA becomes just a formal bureaucratic duty, instead enhancing the embedded cultural development?
- What EU-wide measures could the Agency launch to support Quality promotion (in Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions) so that Quality becomes integral part of the Institutions' strategic planning? By the way, is strategic planning a common feature of Institutions' management?

ORGANISATION AND RESOURCES

Prompts:

- How can the Agency improve the way it communicates itself and the services it provides, so to encourage a shared sense of ownership over the QA tasks performed?
- To what extent can the Agency carry out its two distinctive statutory assignments – Quality Promotion and Evaluation – with the existing organisational chart and resources?
- How can the Agency ensure that the experts in the External Evaluation panels have access to adequate and timely training, considering the available resources?

INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

Prompts:

- What challenges may the Agency face, as a result of the current reform process started by the *Veritatis Gaudium* and affecting the Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions?
- How can AVEPRO strengthen has not any system of incentives/sanctions for the Academic institutions it evaluates?

GOVERNANCE AND STAKEHOLDERS

Prompts:

- Who/what are the Agency's most relevant stakeholders (at national and at international level)?
- To what extent can positive relations with stakeholders (in general) improve AVEPRO's credibility inside and outside the Catholic world?
- How can existing non-national and transversal networks in the Church (e.g. religious Orders) be activated so to increase the Agency's outreach at national and international scale?
- How can they contribute to improve the Agency's QA activities?
- How and to what extent could stakeholders' (missed) involvement in strengthening the system's Quality culture generate opportunities or threats?
- To what extent is the Agency's policy of transparency and disclosure appreciated by its stakeholders?

CROSSING BORDERS

Prompts:

- How should the Agency change/innovate its action so to strengthen its position beyond European borders and be a key player in Higher Education's QA also in other jurisdictions?
- How do you understand the efforts for "networking" that the Agency has been carrying out to support a shared ownership of all processes and generate consensus/support among stakeholders?

Key points of attention:

DEVELOPMENT APPROACH AND ENHANCEMENT

- There should be a clear distinction between QA evaluation and the services to promote QA. It has to be clarified that the Agency is not in charge of accreditation. → OPPORTUNITY
- There must a be coherence between the Agency's strategy and its operations. → STRENGTH
- The SWOT is a key dynamic input to be fed into the Strategic Plan. Strengths should be linked to (expected and actual) impact. Weaknesses should be transformed into objectives still to be achieved so to promote development. This can be done formulating questions to be considered for the Strategic Plan. In this respect, the Plan can only follow the completion of the SWOT. → OPPORTUNITY

ORGANISATION AND RESOURCES

- Not only is AVEPRO a global Agency, but it is a Christian/Catholic Agency. There should be clear references to what Quality is from the Catholic point of view:
 - Crisis of the modern Culture (acritical pluralism)
 - Evolution of modern University (business-oriented)
 - Fragmented visions of the Human Being
- Ecclesiastical HEIs provide an integral formation of their students based on an integral anthropological vision – not just focussing on knowledge. → STRENGTH
- The Catholic identity is what differentiates and expands Ecclesiastical HEIs' goal. → STRENGTH

INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

- HEIs are experiencing massive changes: less traditional students, different careers, new learning/teaching modes, need to find out new forms to support different students. The education system in Europe and worldwide is changing. The Ecclesiastical HEIs and the Agency must be aware of these processes. In the SAR, the Agency must provide a clear insight of these challenges and give the impression that it is ready to handle them, together with the other competent Holy See's institutions. HEIs are ready to take on these challenges. →OPPORTUNITY
- All through the Ecclesiastical HE system there must be a common understanding about Quality. The Agency can help in this task of harmonising what HEIs understand about Quality. The promotion of the Quality culture must progress along these lines, without any sanctioning system (the "stick") but further developing the HEIs' awareness that being "compliant" has positive impact in terms of reputation/public perception, visibility, students' enrolment, etc. →OPPORTUNITY
- In this respect, Among the "positive sticks" we can recall the following:
 - The publication of the External evaluation reports. The Agency may take an extra effort to identify relevant audiences and further promote the Reports to their attention (e.g. students, students' associations, the CEC, Bishops' Conferences, etc.).
 - The presentation of aggregated data taken from the HEIs' SARs. The Agency's advisor, prof. Tosi, presented a concise general overview of the features emerged from the analysis of the results of HEIs' self-evaluation and evaluation documents. The follow-up was remarkable: many HEIs showed a renewed commitment to improvement in a QA perspective. Perhaps, such overviews should become a regular fixture to be made at regional level.
- The Agency needs to be "friendly" and must not be perceived as a "controller" or, worse, as a "judge" observing and evaluating from the top. →OPPORTUNITY
- The selection and training of external experts represent two key concerns for the Agency, especially considering its intent to "go global" and multiply evaluation commitments. →WEAKNESS

GOVERNANCE AND STAKEHOLDERS

- If the Agency intends to stimulate Faculties to draft strategic plans, then it might be helpful to support them in "translating" AVEPRO's documents into practices (to draw examples from). →OPPORTUNITY
- In this respect, the Agency had the idea to set up regional groups of experts who would ensure a stronger link between AVEPRO and the HEIs so to: explain Guidelines; promote exchange of practices (also discussing about criticalities); increase relationships with stakeholders. →OPPORTUNITY
- As regards the overall attitude towards QA, a specific discussion was made during the SC which debated over the first ENQA review. In the SAR there should be a reference to those contents which can help define the notions and practices of QA within the Ecclesiastical HE system. →OPPORTUNITY
- It should be made clearer how the Agency can help Ecclesiastical HEIs in terms of financial sustainability and students' enrolment. →OPPORTUNITY
- Students' engagement: students in Ecclesiastical HEIs have multiple commitments (pastoral, above all) and can devote only a limited amount of time to academic issues. →WEAKNESS
- Features of the Students' population: normally, enrolled students come from many countries and represent a multiplicity of cultures. This is a key feature in Ecclesiastical HEIs. →OPPORTUNITY
- Students need to link up with society and improve their engagement. This may be done introducing "new" study topics such as societal and environmental studies. →OPPORTUNITY
- About the SAR and the 2nd review, the Agency has to reflect about these questions:
 - Why do we want to be part of ENQA? (*motivation for ENQA membership*)
 - What Quality are we going after, and for what?

There should be made clear the following process:

SAR → QIP → Strategic Planning → Monitoring and Support

An example was made: A Faculty did very badly at the SAR – that experience triggered a strong motivation in all its components to improve and overcome the detected criticalities. This move towards development was deeply Quality-inspired and led to positive results. →OPPORTUNITY

- The Agency has multiple activities related to Quality promotion and support to HEIs. The boundaries between “evaluation” and “promotion” need to be defined clearly. →WEAKNESS

CROSSING BORDERS

- National regulatory frameworks and constraints must be considered, e.g. the risk of “double” evaluation in those countries where Ecclesiastical Faculties are within public Universities. This risk must be avoided by creating synergies and collaboration processes with national authorities. →WEAKNESS + OPPORTUNITY