



AVEPRO

THE PROMOTION AND EMBEDDING OF  
QUALITY SUPPORTIVE CULTURES IN  
ECCLESIASTICAL INSTITUTIONS AND  
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES HIGHER  
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

A POSITION STATEMENT FOR THE GUIDANCE OF ECCLESIASTICAL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS  
THEIR GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP AND EXTERNAL REVIEW PANELS

## PREAMBLE

This Position Statement (PS) is one of a series being developed by AVEPRO to provide advice to institutions and others on specific aspects of the academic profile of institutions within the orbit of AVEPRO, which impinge on the quality of the institution, as it meets its obligations to the Church and the broader society it serves. It is not intended to be a rigid set of prescriptions and criteria against which the institution will be evaluated, but a statement of internationally recognised good practice, which will inform how the institution goes about its business generally, and how it espouses the spirit of quality assurance.

One of the prime functions of AVEPRO is the promotion of quality in its institutions, and this involves a consideration of the questions of what constitutes a Q culture; how a Q culture may evolve and mature; what are its component elements; how can it be embedded and infused into the attitudes and behaviour of groups and functions at all levels in the organisation; and how it can be enriched by key academic and support processes. In short, the paper is not only about promotion of a Q culture per se (i.e. proclaiming its necessity and securing its acceptance), but also about its thorough embedding in the lifestyle of an institution (behaviour, processes and policies), rather than some marginal activity which is a nuisance and distraction.

This PS is thus intended to be a document which provides a compelling rationale for the evolution of a Q culture within institutions, and also a practical document containing guidance on setting up processes to bring about acceptance and use in practical situations. Thus, it should be of use to institutional governing structures including boards, grand chancellors and superiors of religious Orders; bishops' conferences, leaders of institutions at various levels; and as a source of reference for external review teams thus helping them to understand the functioning of an institution, and to make positive helpful recommendations. It is not a document about issues in the wider societal culture and the role of universities in substantive issues such as peace and poverty: these are for another AVEPRO paper of guidance, though the outward looking aspects of Q as a process are acknowledged.

Whereas the prime focus of this PS is on those HEIs with ecclesiastical faculties of theology, philosophy, canon law, social sciences and other specialisms encouraged by *Veritatis Gaudium* and other pronouncements, the contents are equally applicable to Catholic institutions in general, or faculties within a larger secular university. The PS acknowledges that there are wide variations in the size, scope, profile, traditions and settings of institutions, and their maturity in the quality domain. Thus, institutions are encouraged to assess which of the approaches discussed in the paper are most relevant to their circumstances and needs. The principle of fitness for purpose must be applied.

This PS should be considered by institutions together with the main general AVEPRO Guidelines, and other guidelines and position statements on relevant themes. The Position Statement is framed as a series of questions, which institutions might reasonably ask on the issue, and it attempts to provide a series of possible answers, depending on the nature of the

institution, based on relevant international good practice. What is proposed is consistent with the developmental philosophy and approach adopted by AVEPRO, rather than a strict audit orientation, often favoured elsewhere. It should be emphasised that the promotion and embedding of a QA philosophy in institutions very much depends on institutional culture, which is a compound of a host of factors relating to values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour of individuals and collectively within an institution. These factors are coupled with those external imperatives which condition behaviour in particular directions, and those internal instruments which guide behaviour in certain ways. This is why consideration of institutional culture is a central element, since it may facilitate Q initiatives or restrain them. The focus of the PS is thus on facilitation, to achieve AVEPROs aims in the advancement of QA.

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THIS POSITION STATEMENT

The position statement is structured around a series of key questions relating to the promotion and embedding of a Quality Culture

- Why is this an important topic at the present time, and what are the compelling contextual factors?
- What are the characteristics of Q cultures in HEI generally, and what are the desiderata to be aimed for?
- What is the nature of the cultural characteristics of ecclesiastical Institutions, and do these pose any difficulties in the Q domain?
- What are the critical instruments in the promotion and embedding of a Q culture in institutions?
- What are the stages involved in evolution of mature Q cultures?
- What should be the role of the rector in this process of evolution?

## WHY IS THIS AN IMPORTANT TOPIC AT THE PRESENT TIME, AND WHAT ARE THE COMPELLING CONTEXTUAL FACTORS?

In Higher Education generally there are a plethora of reasons why there is considerable interest at the present time in the concept and characteristics of a Q culture in universities, which principally stem from the various external factors which have created different ways by which the institution has to justify itself. These include, for HEI as a whole:

- the demands of public accountability (value for money);
- social relevance of education and research; consistency with desired public goals
- the need to demonstrate efficient stewardship of scarce public and private funds; to secure savings, and to redistribute where necessary

- the improvement of quality of education, teaching and learning research , R and D and Third Mission activities for the benefit of users of these services
- the comparison of university performance with others in efforts to raise standards
- many such institutions are facing actual or potential issues of institutional sustainability in the short, medium and long terms, in relation to student demand and numbers, the possible obsolescence of programmes and research, staffing profiles, critical mass, and related financial difficulties. To adequately address these issues, a culture embracing critical self-questioning and transparency is needed, and a will to define innovative solutions.

All the above, apparent to varying extents in both public and non-public institutions, inevitably create the need for institutional self-awareness, both for its own sake, and to prepare the HEI for possible external scrutiny or interventions. This self-awareness manifests itself in an ethic of self-evaluation and correction; responsiveness and social responsibility; and the ideal of the learning organisation. In instrumental terms, we therefore witness, inter alia:

- aspects of a culture of compliance with external imperatives, but preferably not replicating in a rigid bureaucratic way the character of external processes
- the development of internal processes of introspection
- the close relationship between Q diagnosis and institutional planning
- benchmarking and transparency

The consequences for the nature and development of internal culture and associated cultural change are fairly obvious from the above discussion.

For Ecclesiastical Institutions specifically:

Some of the above also applies to ecclesiastical institutions, but here, we have further imperatives, which are expressed in documentation such as: *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (for Catholic Universities) and *Veritatis Gaudium* (for ecclesiastical faculties), together with various pronouncements by the Holy Father on his expectations of institutions within his jurisdiction, to gatherings of institutional leaders.

As far as the former Apostolic constitutions are concerned, the following are relevant justifications:

*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* para 2

A serious and mature Q culture in the institution would certainly help create and strengthen “hope for a new flowering of Christian culture in the rich and varied context of our changing times” in contemporary society.

*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* para 7

A continual attention and concern for quality culture as part of a continuous renewal of the Catholic HEI. “What is at stake is the very meaning of scientific and technological research, of social life and culture, but at an even more profound level, what is at stake is the very meaning of the human person” and “a University is made more capable of conducting an impartial search

for truth, a search that is neither subordinated to, nor conditioned by particular interests of any kind”

Ex Corde Ecclesiae para 10

“Whilst this document concerns Catholic universities, it is meant to include all Catholic Institutions of higher education engaged in instilling the Gospel message of Christ in souls and cultures”

Ex Corde Ecclesiae para 16-20

“Quality culture should serve the proper mission of the Catholic HEI which is characterised by “promoting an integration of knowledge, a dialogue between faith and reason, an ethical concern and a theological perspective”

Veritatis Gaudium para 1

“The task of the HEI is linked to the Church’s evangelising mission, which flows from her very identity as completely committed to promoting the authentic and integral growth of the human family towards its definitive fulness in God the vast multidisciplinary system of ecclesiastical studies”

This plea for a culture of borderless research and teaching is specifically manifested by Pope Francis in such encyclicals as *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*. He also stated recently\*

“I invite you not to settle for short term solutions, and not to hink of this process of growth simply as a “defensive action”, aimed at coping with dwindling resources, but instead it should be seen as an impetus for the future it can inhibit if it becomes too self-referential we must be open to courageous and new developments”<sup>1</sup>. The case for a consideration of the nature of Q cultures in HEI is compelling and thoroughly justified by assumptions and practice from both higher education in general, and by the Church in particular. Institutions therefore neglect it at their peril.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY CULTURES IN HEI GENERALLY, AND WHAT ARE THE DESIDERATA WHICH SHOULD BE AIMED FOR ?

This section responds to the need for a definition of Q cultures implied in the Preamble.

In institutions which are relatively mature in terms of their approach to Quality matters, it is possible to discern relatively common positive characteristics of how staff members and students feel and behave, both as individuals and as part of an academic community. Such attributes tend to be reflected in a consensus, which makes it much easier to design and implement structures and processes related to Q matters. Such attributes together form part of

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<sup>1</sup> Address to Roman Pontifical Universities 25 February 2023 in Rome

the value system of the institution, or the cement which holds it together, especially in times of stress. These elements may be characterised thus:

- a willingness to recognise and accept external perspectives critique and comment as a positive thing in the spirit of institutional improvement. This implies an acceptance of the legitimacy of social responsiveness, and of user perceptions of university effectiveness in meeting external needs.
- an ability to engage in open and frank self criticism, to admit to weakness, both collectively and individually, and accept accountability and responsibility in a spirit of trust and ethical probity.
- the readiness to confront problems which may be identified, and to generate solutions to those problems.
- the strategic thinking ability to prioritise and make systematic choices of action ie an appreciation of the link between QA and strategic planning
- the ability to handle internal comparisons (and possible competitive attitudes) transparently and sympathetically
- a readiness to accept experimentation and the learning which may spring from this, as a normal and welcome feature of innovative institutional life ie moving outside the comfort zone
- a trust in the ability of the institution to act supportively and developmentally with individuals, in the case of resolving issues identified, to the benefit of individuals affected and the institution as a whole. This might involve changing the rule book
- developmentally oriented and sympathetic leadership which regards QA as a means to a greater end, rather than a bureaucratic necessity
- a general acceptance of the legitimacy of the tenets and thought processes behind QA, namely: what are we doing, why are we doing it, how well are we doing it, how do we know, what can we do to improve?

These characteristics of belief and behaviour are associated with the concept of the Learning Organisation /Learning University, with the emphasis being on adaptation and transformation, which is surely what creative QA is all about. The above, by implication, gives a template against which to understand and evaluate the beliefs and behaviours in Catholic and ecclesiastical institutions, and to suggest possible elements for adoption. In this as well, we see the need for institutional leaders to create a balance between the need for stability and the need for innovation and transformation, so called “ambidexterity”

In practical terms, this involves the necessity of leaders at various levels continually reiterating and demonstrating the above, in terms of pronouncements at meetings, papers, interactions with colleagues, and generally by attitudes and behaviour.

## WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ECCLESIASTICAL AND CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS, AND DO THESE POSE PROBLEMS IN THE Q DOMAIN?

If the above re the generally accepted characteristics of a Q Culture in HEI, what can be said about the nature of cultures in contemporary RC HEI? This is a very complex, but important question, and the conclusions may well give pointers as to what transformations are needed to give effect to successful promotion and embedding of QA, which are twin goals of AVEPRO. In this discussion, the elements outlined in the previous section of the PS should be borne in mind, as comparators. As far as ecclesiastical institutions are concerned, their adoption of a QA culture differs considerably. Nonetheless, the following aspects have been observed:

- many are institutions with a considerable history and tradition, and because some have survived for many centuries, the assumption is that their quality must be good, and that a quality culture by definition, must exist. This belief is even held when there is widespread evidence of actual or impending lack of institutional sustainability, financial difficulties, low enrolments, poor progression and completion, and a questionable research output. Complacency, an excess reliance on traditional often outdated processes, and slow moving decision making and limited will or capacity for change may be assumed to be apparent.
- institutional reviews may often reveal a deficit in self-criticality
- problem avoidance may be evident, rather than confronting those issues defined above, and a general consensus to abstain from dealing with difficulties, often due to a strong collegialism, a quasi-monastic setting, and respect for isolated individualism among the faculty, maybe irrespective of performance on the job
- the charism of the Order sponsoring the institution may be very beautiful and thoroughly consistent with the teachings of the Gospels, and its ethos may well be kind and non threatening, and a safe non exposed environment. However, this may well inhibit the willingness to confront issues unearthed in Q reviews, and the question is then how far can the charism adapt to suit the needs of the time, as requested in the quotation by Pope Francis earlier.
- there is general a very low corporate presence and fairly loose leadership style not characterised by interventions, nor indeed is there a tradition of strategic planning which would articulate with QA cycles ie steerage is relatively loose
- there is the adherence to the rule book, in this case, the imperatives in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* or *Veritatis Gaudium*, which, though definitive in terms of belief and guidance, may still be a deterrent to experimentation or innovation or institutional flexibility, as imagined by Pope Francis.

The above characteristics are very typical of a collegial culture, which a certain bureaucratic cultural overlay. There are huge strengths to a collegial culture, in terms of individualism, creativity, and respect, but it does make coherent responses to external initiatives or threats somewhat difficult to realise.

It is not suggested that all HEI exhibit all these characteristics far from it , but there is a sufficient deficit to suggest that QA cultures and associated behaviours in RC HEI are often weak , and thus need promotion and systematic embedding. It is also not true to say that these are bad HEI; far from it, and there are clearly positives. It is more accurate to say that they do not necessarily display the characteristics of recognised QA cultures in wider HE communities as outlined in the previous section, and the question is therefore how far some of these characteristics should be adopted and developed to meet the system needs of QA promotion and embeddedness.

If it is felt that this evolution and shift is indeed needed, then the question is how do we achieve this; what instruments may be deployed to facilitate the evolution; and over what timescale in the case of the individual institution? All this needs to be put in the context of the quasi micro-political setting, in the sense that in any institution, there are contending forces for and against the initiatives which may be proposed. These will differ across institutions, and also between ecclesiastical institutions, and the more broad based Catholic universities, or institutes within state universities, which probably admit external influences more readily.

The critical question is that, if HEI do not evolve their cultures, can they survive the consequences in a very turbulent world of higher education?

## WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL INSTRUMENTS WHICH MAY BE DEPLOYED TO ENHANCE THE PROMOTION AND EMBEDDEDNESS OF QA IN INSTITUTIONS ?

Culture is very much a function of beliefs and associated behaviours, and will shift organically due to the interplay of personalities and groups, and the stimulus of internal and external factors in the setting of the institution. However, it is evident that technical factors can play an important part in change towards a Q culture by, e.g:

- requiring behaviour to change to meet the technical demands of various QA instruments
- setting up different patterns and groupings of work relationships where exposure to colleagues with different agendas and work practices causes a shift in beliefs and behaviours i.e. cultural shift.

Thus, the behaviours indicated in the second question above emerge over time, as people get used to the new circumstances.

There may be several manifestations of such technical determinants of behaviour. These include:

- the setting up of a comprehensive portfolio of QA/QE instruments across the HEI for education/teaching and learning; research and scholarship; third mission; internationalisation; partnerships; units and support services
- the attention to quality improvement, and looking forward rather than backward looking audit, is considerably more positive. The link of QA/QE to strategic planning and organisational improvement plans is an aspect of this



- the demonstration of an action loop and regular cycle of reviews /action /reset /review etc, ensuring action follows diagnosis of problems, rather than evaluation being an end in itself
- the use of review instruments which require thought and self-analysis and self-critique rather than the repetition of facts and ticking boxes. This also applies to AVEPRO instruments such as the guidance offered on the construction of the SER in external review processes.
- the regularity of an annual QA calendar corresponding with the strategic plan cycle
- a range of honest and transparent institutional performance data, which limits self delusion and obfuscation.
- the existence of a dedicated QA/QE organisation which together manage processes, instruments and data
- a well functioning and fit for purpose People Management/HR function, which ensures effective appraisal of staff performance, and excellent professional development, and through remedial counselling can sensitively support and help the poorer performer.

The existence and effective functioning of the above, in a low key but systematic manner, and staffed by competent and sensitive people is more likely to persuade staff in universities that a shift to a QA Culture is likely to be helpful. The sustainability of a Q culture is clearly jeopardised if the above do not work properly, cause irritation and do not yield anything which is demonstrably useful to individuals and the HEI. It needs to be supportive of individual needs and to contribute hugely to the credibility and sustainability of the institution. In short, QA should be essentially developmental rather than just evaluative.

## WHAT MIGHT BE THE STAGES INVOLVED IN THE EVOLUTION TOWARDS STRONG QUALITY CULTURES IN INSTITUTIONS?

Establishing a strong Q Culture is a progressive evolutionary process for institutions, as it involves attitude shifts, the acquisition of certain skills and knowledge, a feeling of confidence, coming to terms with the fact that, properly done, QA processes lead to consequences, and the sensitive implementation of relevant processes which are not overly onerous or perceived to be irrelevant. This has often to be set against external pressures from agencies, government and the user community which may require relatively swift and comprehensive action in the Q domain. There is thus a careful balance to be struck. The evolution of maturity in the Q domain in HEI is thus a desired state of affairs, and may be conceptually and practically viewed along two dimensions

1. the degree of importance to an HEI, and the amount of Q activity which can be taken. This is on a spectrum from Low to High Importance and Volume of Q Activity
2. the degree to which any Q activity is largely ad hoc and uncoordinated, or, on the other hand, whether it is systematically done.

If this is felt to be desirable, then the need would be to systematise and embed a limited number of items as building blocks for the future. These might include some of the Instruments suggested in the next section of this paper. These might be:

- clear definition of roles and responsibilities in respect of QA, especially a properly functioning Q office
- assistance from a partner university experienced in QA to provide advice and help with the design of instruments of QA
- a clear but realistic QA/QE strategy, with a well-defined scope and a close connection between strategy and QA and Q improvement planning
- an accurate but honest data base relating to students, staff profile, staff performance
- an explicit Q cycle.
- training

What goes in here will clearly depend on where the HEI actually is in QA, and where it decides it wants to go. As the above are progressively embedded, then other elements from the Instruments can be added.

The emphasis is on realism, and well functioning arrangements whatever they are in order to realise a sensible and acceptable evolution of a Q culture. In this, the role of senior institutional leadership is critical, and to this, we now turn.

## WHAT ROLES SHOULD THE RECTOR AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP PLAY IN THE EVOLUTION OF A QUALITY CULTURE AND ITS SUCCESSFUL EMBEDDING IN THE INSTITUTION?

As the accountable head of an institution, the rector or president clearly has a major role to play in the development and sustainability of a Q Culture, in order to be able to demonstrate to external reviewers and stakeholders that the institution is in good shape, and capable of remaining excellent, fit for purpose and sustainable, in often turbulent environments. There are several important functions, therefore to be carried out, which include the following:

- appointment of key senior staff with responsibility for Q including vice rector and director of Q, and faculty responsible with specialist knowledge and ongoing personal development and monitoring
- ensuring that all policy portfolios have a Q dimension (education, research etc)
- ensuring an effective Q committee reporting to senate is appointed/elected of appropriate members with faculty linking pins
- ensuring that deans' and heads of departments' roles contain a responsibility for QA and QE for those activities under their jurisdiction. QA should be commonly owned, not given to an isolated Q functionary with limited authority.

- designing the role of governing bodies to take a responsibility for QA receiving reports and ensuring action follows
- ensuring the design of Q policy and processes are collectively developed, legitimised and implemented to ensure ownership
- ensuring Q figures in mission and values, and that there is a direct connection between QA and strategic planning, both in timing alignment and content
- ensuring that the action and feedback loop to organisational improvement is properly functioning
- ensuring widespread briefings on QA are held across the HEI, together with training as needed
- ensuring personnel and HR policies and practice are geared up to Q improvement
- reinforcement by personal example of evaluation of own performance

Ambiguity and half-heartedness by the rector in relation to any of the above will seriously weaken the Q Culture, to the point where it is difficult to restore.

It is also important to recognise that Grand Chancellors, boards, and Bishops' conferences and superiors of Orders have roles to play in the strengthening of Q Cultures, rather than take a very distant and detached interest in Q, which often happens at present. This might take several forms eg

- being involved in discussions surrounding the design of Q strategy and processes, so they are aware of what is being done
- ditto for external reviews, where they should certainly be providing evidence, and receiving and discussing the implications of both favourable reviews and what should be done to correct any negative comments
- monitoring the implementation of any action items emerging from internal and external reviews, and holding the rector responsible for ensuring actions are being undertaken. This would include receiving and commenting on annual Q reports.

It should be emphasised their role is in Q policy and Q monitoring rather than in depth immersion in processes which are the proper domain of others. This is consistent with a governing role which is about the sustainability and health of the HEI in the longer term.

The role of students in QA is well documented elsewhere, in terms of involvement in governance; consultation; commenting on the quality of all aspects of the student experience and learning experience; and monitoring whether action has been taken on identified weaknesses.

Clearly, the LEADERSHIP STYLE of the rector and his/her senior colleagues will be important determinants of their success in instituting a well functioning Q Culture. In broad terms, the literature tells us that three approaches can be discerned:

- 1) RATIONAL approach. This is based on the assumption that people who inhabit universities are generally rational, and will respond to arguments which are clearly and logically presented, demonstrate a case, and supported by evidence. In this case, the

rationale for a Q strategy must be clear, explicit and unambiguous; its link to the mission of the Church obvious; and its processes transparent. Standards and desiderata should be perceived as relevant and mission based, and the burden not onerous, and the benefits demonstrable to individual and HEI. However, the collegium may still object because of reasons indicated earlier, and micropolitics of one sort or another may well emerge to distort the systematic rationale. A rational approach must be a given, but may not be enough to establish a Q culture by itself. Consequently, other leadership approaches are likely to be needed for promotional and embedding purposes.

- 2) **NORMATIVE – RE-EDUCATIVE approach.** The underlying assumption here is that people are likely to feel threatened or destabilised by the changes envisaged by QA and QE, which could reveal shortcomings in personal or unit performance, or create tiresome additional work which is not to be central to the role of an academic or support staffer. These approaches are thus sympathetic and designed to be helpful by briefings, involvement in process design, training and skill acquisition (interviewing, data handling, mentoring, counselling in the case of the poor performer, assistance in a specific area of change. Expert assistance, internal or external, may well be advantageous here.
- 3) **POWER – COERCIVE APPROACH.** There may well be occasions when the previous two approaches are not, of themselves, adequate. These may include when a particular process or standard is given without variation by an external agency, where time does not permit of an eternal discussion; where a small minority is holding up progress. In this situation, assuming the rector possesses the requisite positional, statutory or political power via senates, formal edicts, resolutions or decisions may need to be given. Other tactics under this approach may include targeted unit reviews to shake up that unit; withdrawal or redistribution of funding; negotiation and bargaining to secure a desired end; aggressive follow up to reviews of units or functions; nomination of key allies to particular positions.

In many cases concerned with the advancement of a Q culture, different combinations of the above may well be used, to achieve desired ends. Clearly, there are many actors involved in the QA drama within institutions, and the rector has a critical role in generating harmony between these actors to both promote and embed the Q culture.

## CONCLUSIONS

This document will potentially have a variety of positive uses, including the following:

- ✓ It can facilitate debate within the institution and its governing authorities and users on the nature of the institution, its general health, and how it assures it is of high quality, either in policy for a or in training events.
- ✓ It can act as a basic framework for the process of constructing the Self Evaluation Report, both for AVEPRO and other external agencies.

- ✓ It should be helpful for institutions which are less mature in quality processes, to figure out their priorities for becoming more systematic.
- ✓ It should be helpful for external review teams to comment constructively on the current status of quality within an HEI, and to recommend avenues of future development.

Its use is thus commended to a wide range of users.