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'It's paradoxical, but it works' – Towards ambidexterity in external quality assurance: the case of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on organizational responses to seemingly paradoxical mandates, in the context of external quality assurance in higher education. With the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* in 2018, Roman Catholic ecclesiastical higher education institutions have been required to be evaluated by a designated external quality assurance agency, the Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO). Operating internationally, the Agency is tasked to both *evaluate* quality with an accountability mindset and *promote* quality with a continuous enhancement outlook. These two approaches to quality processes can be considered conflicting notions. Using the lens of paradox theory and organizational ambidexterity to observe the nature of and responses to tensions, this study considers how AVEPRO managed the challenge of reconciling both QA and QE imperatives. Although ambidexterity studies have mainly focused on the private sector, this analysis shows that this theoretical framework can provide a relevant lens in other contexts where paradoxes exist, such as external quality assurance agencies in higher education. Findings show that an innovative organizational structure and a creative mindset can reconcile quality assurance and quality enhancement processes through different channels.

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Introduction

With the advent of the European 'quality revolution' (Newton 2007), when the Bologna process's commitment to transparency and comparability in higher education spurred the creation of external quality assurance (EQA) agencies, finding a balance between quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE) has been an organizational dilemma for many of these agencies (Raban 2007; Vroeijenstijn 1995; Woodhouse 1998). This study will examine how inherent tensions stemming from a mandate with seemingly opposing goals could be overcome through the development of ambidextrous structures and processes. More specifically, it will look at the case of AVEPRO, the Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties. Operating internationally, the Agency is tasked to both evaluate quality with an accountability mindset *and* promote quality with a continuous enhancement outlook.

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Paradox theory is used as an anchor in this analysis as it provides a lens to appreciate the nature of organizational tensions (Lewis and Smith 2014). It is complemented by organizational ambidexterity (OrgA) theory to guide the observation of responses to such tensions. OrgA refers to the ability of an organization to attend to activities whose co-existence may create ‘paradoxical tensions’ (Lewis 2000). By examining AVEPRO’s publicly available strategy and quality-related documents, this study argues that the Agency could attempt to address both quality assurance and quality promotion activities through the development of ambidextrous organizational elements. Although OrgA studies have mainly focused on the private sector, I follow the path of other scholars stressing that the OrgA theoretical framework can provide a relevant lens to investigate paradoxes observable in other contexts (e.g. Gieske, Duijn, and van Buuren 2020; S. Maine, Samuelsson, and Uman 2022; Smith, Seraphin, and Cripps 2022). The co-existence of quality assurance and quality enhancement prerogatives as per AVEPRO’s mandate will be examined on these theoretical premises.

Quality processes, paradoxical tensions and ambidexterity approaches

Quality assurance / quality enhancement tensions

Defining the concepts of QA and QE is a challenge in itself. As Williams (2016) pointed out in his literature review on the two terms, quality evaluation is often referred to as quality assurance, or accountability, while quality enhancement is often interchangeably called quality improvement, or quality promotion, with slight differences in use. Quality assurance and quality enhancement are commonly understood as umbrella concepts that cover a ‘clearly distinct range of activities’ (Williams 2016, 97). Most European EQA schemes function on the premises that both QA and QE processes must be set up to comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA, commonly referred to as the ESG. However, the ESG are not prescriptive on how the QA and QE processes should be set up, and this organizational design is left to the agencies depending on their local specificities.

Management studies have long shown that organizations facing the need to address varied, and at times opposing, demands can opt for an ‘either/or’ perspective, in a contingency approach (Lewis and Smith 2014). The core tenet here is to solve what is considered a coexistence problem of ‘doing two different things at the same time’ (Birkinshaw and Gupta 2013, 288) through the development of the best structure or strategy at that point of time. Researchers have later embraced another way to address such organizational tensions, opting for paradoxical thinking with a ‘both/and’ mindset (Lewis and Smith 2014). The paradox lens has developed in organization studies to recognize the ‘move beyond oversimplified and polarized notions to recognize the complexity, diversity, and ambiguity of organizational life’ (Lewis 2000, 760). Paradox emanates here from the possible tensions arising from simultaneously juggling activities that may be construed as opposed or greatly diverse, especially when resources are constrained (Cao, Gedajlovic, and Zhang 2009; Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis 2015). However, tensions are seen here as an opportunity rather than a threat for organizational performance if approached in a synergetic manner (Lewis 2000).

When looking at the QA and QE activities, the contingency vs paradox mindsets are reflected in Williams (2016) four models on the relationships between the two processes

- 1) **QA and QE are in opposition to each other and produce different outcomes.** They are judged irreconcilable.
- 2) **QA and QE take place without reference to each other.** They are clearly separate processes and work in parallel.
- 3) **QA leads to QE on a linear scale.** QE starts with QA and can eventually replace it.
- 4) **QA and QE are integrated within one process.** They are part of a cycle and inform each other.

The four models are illustrated in [Figure 1](#) below.

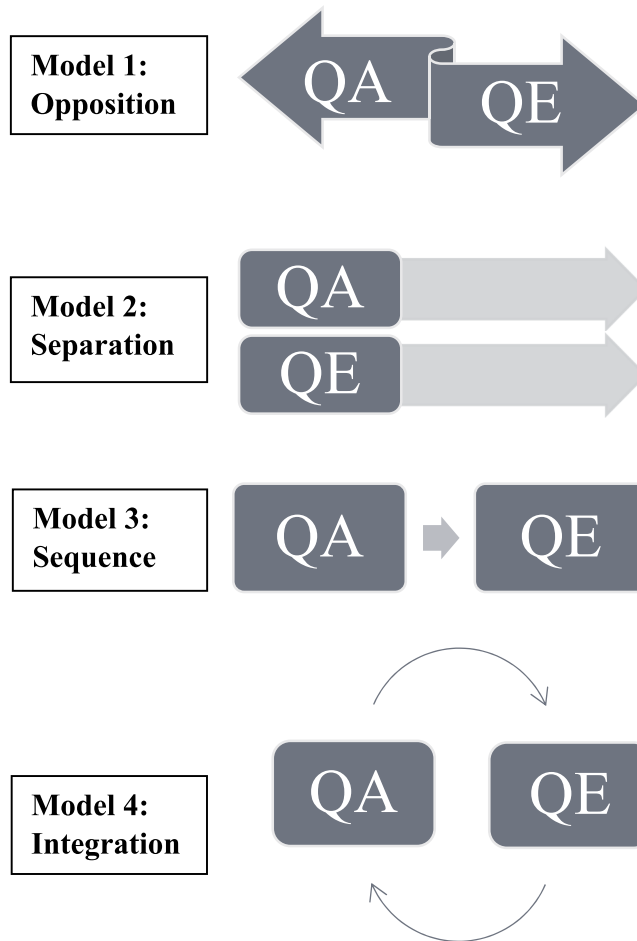


Figure 1. Four models of QA/QE relationships, adapted from Williams (2016).

If the first three models tend to consider QA and QE as processes to be addressed separately, in a contingency manner, the fourth model adopts a paradoxical lens by integrating them as one process.

These models highlight the inherent challenge faced by external quality assurance agencies in Europe to set up their operations when mandated by the ESG to address both. An EQA must develop an organizational design that will permit it to manage both, and the level of tensions arising from this dual activity will vary depending on the QA/QE 'mindset' adopted by the agency as per Williams' models. In practice, quality assurance systems in the EHEA have increasingly shown a diversity of organizational set-ups, with the goal to meet the ESG requirements and fit developments in higher education in their own national contexts, with some managing QA and QE activities in separate entities, while others only focus at the moment on improvement activities, without an accountability function (Dakovic and Gover 2021; Hopbach and Flierman 2020). This variation of models resonates with Lewis's argument that the existence of tensions depend on actors' interpretation of a given situation: 'Paradoxical tensions are perceptual - that is, cognitively or socially constructed polarities that mask the simultaneity of conflicting truths' (Lewis 2000, 761). In other words, what one agency would consider as a paradoxical tension would not be considered as such by another, and in consequence the organizational designs will come up differently even if charged with the same imperative to cover QA and QE.

Vroeiensstijn (1995) summarized the QA/QE challenge faced by external quality assurance agencies with a Greek analogy of a boat navigating between the sea monster ‘Scylla’ of improvement and the whirlpool ‘Charybdis’ of accountability:

External quality assessment has two purposes: quality improvement and accountability. To fulfil these two purposes, managing the EQA-process, is like navigating between these two extremes. When one aims only at improvement, the system will be shipwrecked against the ‘Scylla’ because the outside stakeholders will ask for accountability and design their own EQA system. If accountability is emphasized too much, the system will disappear in the ‘Charybdis’, because improvement will be hindered or even made impossible. The challenge is to keep on course and, by doing so, reconcile the two purposes in one system. It will not be easy. (Vroeiensstijn 1995, 33)

This difficult ‘navigation’ between QA and QE can explain in part the tendency noted by Elken and Stensaker (2022) of European quality assurance agencies developing as ambidextrous organizations, balancing tasks that can be considered by some conflicting or at least distinct. Elken and Stensaker’s study (2022) also points towards other activities beyond these traditional tasks that can be construed as conflicting functions, such as consultancy activities.

In the next section, I elaborate on this observation by arguing that organizational ambidexterity offers a valuable framework for understanding organization design and its evolution, and provides relevant tools for developing a quality management system based on the QA/QE model adopted by, or mandated to, an agency. I will first provide an overview of the OrgA literature, how it relates to paradox theory and then present the options available to address organizational tensions.

Organizational ambidexterity: theoretical underpinnings and approaches

Ambidexterity literally refers to one’s capacity to be agile with both arms. In the management literature, the term was introduced by Duncan (1976) to underline the benefits of having two separate structures within an organization to develop innovative practices on one side, and implement them on the other side. Academic interest in ambidexterity was accrued with March’s (1991) paper opposing the *exploitation* of current practices within an organization and the *exploration* of new opportunities, and how the two need to be pursued, or balanced, for organizations to be high performing. Since March’s seminal work, the OrgA literature has expanded exponentially, due in part to its versatility (Birkinshaw and Gupta 2013). Indeed, ambidexterity helps framing the challenges faced by an organization when dealing with dualities in a broader sense than the original firm-based concepts of exploration and exploitation. It is also a way to understand the choices made by organizations in their design, their allocation of resources and their strategic priorities. For instance, an EQA agency can choose to dedicate time and resources to QA first and leave QE to a later stage, in other words making a temporary trade-off between the two.

Based on this assumption, organizations are faced with choices to make in order to tackle existing strategic tensions stemming from the need to manage multiple, and sometimes contradicting, activities. There is no shortage of studies enriching, discussing and applying ambidexterity to all kinds of phenomena (Birkinshaw and Gupta 2013; Charles and Tushman 2013), but they all build on three fundamental OrgA elements. First, exploitation and exploration tensions exist within organizational life; second, exploitation and exploration need to be balanced or combined for optimal performance; and third, there is a paradox inherent to this situation (Cao, Gedajlovic, and Zhang 2009; Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis 2015; Ripkey 2017). Scholars have identified in that respect four strategies to address opposite poles, namely, opposition, spatial separation, temporal separation and synthesis (Poole and van de Ven 1989). If the first approach, also called acceptance, proposes to merely ‘live with’ the paradoxical tensions, the other three aim to resolve them in practice (W. Smith and Lewis 2011). OrgA scholars have drawn on paradox theory and developed three analogous resolution strategies in their attempts to reconcile the contention between exploratory and exploitative activities (Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis 2015), as depicted in the first two columns of Table 1 below. First, a number of scholars, led by Tushman and O’Reilly (1996), advocated for a *structural*

Table 1. Mapping QA/QE relationships, paradox strategies and organizational ambidexterity approaches to manage organizational tensions (by author).

QA/QE relationships	Paradox strategy	OrgA approach to managing tensions
Model 1 – Opposition	Opposition/Acceptance	N/A
Model 2 – Separation	Spatial separation	Approach 1 – Structural separation
Model 3 – Sequence	Temporal separation	Approach 2 – Temporal separation
Model 4 – Integration	Synthesis	Approach 3 – Integrative relationship

separation of units dedicated to exploration and exploitation within the organization, on the premise that the cultures of innovation/exploration and continuity/exploitation are irreconcilable. Others, such as Duncan (1976), believed that a *temporal separation* is necessary, with periods of time devoted to exploitation followed by periods dedicated to exploration, depending on the context, resources, or needs. These two approaches can be assimilated to the spatial and temporal separations of paradox theorists, and both are based on the assumption that exploration and exploitation are needed but not compatible in the same place or time.

Drawing on the synthesis approach, Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis (2015) advocated for a third stream of OrgA research aiming to reconcile the two poles, depicting them as interrelated and even complementary, rather than conflicting elements. This *integrative approach* to resolve tensions has two main tenets, integration and creativity. On the former, scholars argue that managers can handle tensions in their field of work in a simultaneous manner, moving away from separation and towards synthesis and transcendence. On the latter, the synthesis approach suggests that the practice of ambidexterity through that paradox lens can help develop a ‘creative tension’ (Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis 2015, 11) that will drive change and provide solutions to overcome divergent logics. This change of paradigm in OrgA studies is based on the premise that paradoxical realities exist, but can be embraced in a transcendent way and ‘assist in finding workable solutions rather than being lost in the frustrations of complex paradoxical realities’ (S. Smith, Seraphin, and Cripps 2022, 17).

Because the ambidexterity construct aims to address organizational tensions, it can provide a relevant framework for examining the distinctive QA and QE concepts. In order to make it a workable construct, I propose in the next section a mapping of the three approaches to ambidexterity with the QA/QE models presented in Figure 1. This will then facilitate the analysis of AVEPRO’s case.

Mapping organizational ambidexterity and quality assurance / quality enhancement models

OrgA studies have been mostly focused on business practice in March’s tradition by looking at patterns of exploitation of established activities versus exploration of innovations (Gieske, Duijn, and van Buuren 2020). However, OrgA can be relevant lens to address organizational tensions in other contexts, and in a larger sense than March’s original conception. For instance, public organizations are particularly interesting cases because they do not have the choice of their mandates and therefore must often deal with conflicting goals due to a diversity of stakeholder (Maine, Samuelsson, and Uman 2022), and they need to respond ‘to both stable and turbulent technological and stakeholder environments’ (Bryson, Boal, and Rainey 2008, 3, original emphasis). Another example is the use of the OrgA framework to map the tensions pertaining to the delivery of responsible management education at universities. There is on one hand the ‘exploitation’ of classic business education knowledge with a focus on profit, and on the other hand the ‘exploration’ of modern imperatives related to sustainability and responsibility (S. Smith, Seraphin, and Cripps 2022). In a similar non-conventional way, I propose to apply the OrgA framework to the field of quality assurance agencies, and more specifically as it relates to the tensions between QA and QE. To that end, the three OrgA approaches have been mapped to Williams’ four models of QA/QE relationships, as presented in Table 1 below.

Model 1 does not apply in this mapping work since it is not effectively addressing the QA/QE conflict but only accepting it as an irreconcilable situation to live with. In the case of quality assurance agencies, if QA and QE are considered parallel but separate processes (Model 2), then a structural approach to organizational ambidexterity would be the best fit, with for instance two units dealing with QA and QE separately. Model 3, Sequence, can be assimilated to organizational ambidexterity based on temporal separation, when episodes of QA and QE activities are alternating or one eventually replaces the other.

The last model representing the QA and QE relationships, Integration, transcends the opposition and integrates them as two greatly connected aspects of the same process, where they inform each other in a dynamic and synergistic manner. This reframing from a 'either/or' to a 'and/both' mindset has been considered as a necessary balancing act in quality management systems, but intricate to implement in practice (Danø and Stensaker 2007; Thune 1996). In effect, when looking at the evolution of the quality management field in Europe in the last decades, there has been a tendency to tilt towards the QA side (Danø and Stensaker 2007; Westerheijden 2001). This has been particularly the case in European countries because of the ESG's focus on measuring quality in terms of its 'fitness-for-purpose' (Gover and Loukkola 2018, 29). On that basis, an effective quality management system should be designed to ensure that an institution's activities and outcomes are in line with 'a defined mission or purpose or a set of standards or criteria' (Gover and Loukkola 2018, 7), which leans towards more emphasis on accreditation, standards, and accountability. In addition, even if quality enhancement is acknowledged as a goal within the quality system, practice differs and it remains a mostly bureaucratic process, showing a gap 'between aspiration and implementation' (Gover and Loukkola 2018, 31). Nevertheless, while this EQA development in Europe can give the impression that the tensions between the two concepts of QA and QE are not reconcilable in one space and time, the fourth model can offer an alternative by conceptualizing an organizational design with a focus on integration and synthesis.

The next section will offer an empirical analysis of the AVEPRO case, in an effort to investigate how the Agency intended to manage its dual QA and QE obligation. First, AVEPRO and the QA and QE goals included in its mandate will be presented. An analysis of AVEPRO's publicly available documents will next be made to outline signs of OrgA, showing in turn to what extent the Agency attempted to address the QA/QE tensions through ambidexterity, and which model was adopted.

Empirical analysis – AVEPRO

Setting the stage

792 entities across the globe are classified as Roman catholic ecclesiastical institutions, granting academic degrees in Canon law, theology, and philosophy in the name of the Holy See. Following the Holy See's adhesion to the Bologna Process in 2003, AVEPRO was established by the Pope in 2007 to support the implementation of quality management processes within these institutions. While AVEPRO's remit was at first limited to ecclesiastical institutions based in the EHEA, its scope extended globally to all existing EHIs with the promulgation in 2018 of the new Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* (Pope 2018).

The mission of the Agency is to instill a quality culture and conduct evaluations in the EHIs in order to fulfill the Bologna requirements and to be aligned with the ESG. Specifically:

AVEPRO promotes the quality of ecclesiastical academic Institutions to fulfil their proper mission and evaluates the attainment of appropriate international standards. (AVEPRO 2019c, 18, original emphasis)

In addition, the Agency is by Statute autonomous in its operations:

While complying with the canonical provisions in force and the international agreements on the subject of Higher Education to which the Holy See is a party, the Agency enjoys autonomy in its performance of the

activities provided for in this Statute. To this end it develops, updates and implements appropriate measures and procedures for the attainment of institutional goals. (AVEPRO 2015, art. 2)

This autonomy has been confirmed in practice by external reviewers of AVEPRO (Vettori et al. 2019), which indicates that the Agency can set up its own organizational design and strategy, in order to deliver on its mandate. The next sections intend to outline the research methodology used in order to explore AVEPRO's management of its dual mandate.

Methodology

This is a single case study based on qualitative content analysis. The aim is to unearth signs of QA/QE tensions within AVEPRO's publicly available documents. It will then explore how AVEPRO managed both QA and QE operations, and if ambidextrous elements can be observed. The complete dataset comprising of six documents is available in Annex 1. Given that no ambidexterity study has been done in this sector nor looking specifically at QA/QE tensions, this analysis had to be done with no a priori codes, therefore a close and repetitive reading of the documents was performed in order to capture elements referring to QA and QE activities, in an inductive manner. These elements were then classified as either stating a strict differentiation of QA and QE activities, which would relate to structural or temporal separation (OrgA approach 1 or 2), or marking a connection between QA and QE, therefore showing features of an integrative relationship (OrgA approach 3). This study focuses on the manifest content of the documents, categorizing explicit references to QA and QE activities and processes based on whether they relate to a separation or a synergy between the two. It is not a latent text analysis looking at the deeper meaning of the words and phrases. Both manifest and latent text analyses have their merits. The use of the former is justified by the practical constraints of this study where only secondary data could be used, yet manifest analysis serves the research goal since the chosen dataset is detailed and varied enough to observe patterns of QA/QE relationships. The Discussion section will then attempt to provide contextual elements that will shed light on the findings, most importantly on the motives underlying the organizational and process-related choices made by AVEPRO.

It should be noted that as previously discussed, AVEPRO's mandate includes both the evaluation and the promotion of quality. Quality promotion covers in this context not only the support to EHIs in the development of a quality culture and a quality management system, but also refers to the external advice provided to them for the improvement of all their operations (AVEPRO 2019c, 18; Congregation for Catholic Education 2012, 27). Quality *enhancement* can therefore be understood here as part of quality *promotion*, and reference to the latter in the texts will be considered as a reference to quality enhancement in the analysis.

Findings

QA/QE paradoxical tensions

The nature and dual QA/QE scope of AVEPRO mission come up as a source of organizational challenges in the analyzed documents. On one hand, in a SWOT analysis performed in 2018 (AVEPRO 2019a), AVEPRO's advisory boards categorized it as a weakness, pointing out the importance of keeping a clear distinction between the two: 'The boundaries between "evaluation" and "promotion" need to be defined clearly' (AVEPRO 2019a, 7) and 'There should be a clear distinction between QA evaluation and the services to promote QA' (AVEPRO 2019a, 5). On the other hand, AVEPRO's documents also point towards the interconnectedness of QA and QE:

the activities of the Agency form a mechanism in which evaluation, promotion and dissemination of the quality culture are interrelated, and provide the backbone for the institutional evaluation of the Universities and ecclesiastical Faculties. (AVEPRO 2019c, 27)

and

it is neither possible nor useful to trace a borderline between these two activities [...] In the Agency's perspective these two purposes are related to enhancement processes which belong to the promotion of a shared cultural framework. Therefore, the promotion of quality starts with a QA process and it achieves its highest realisation when the academic Institution uses the recommendations of the external evaluation commission in order to redefine its strategic objectives. (AVEPRO 2019c, 26)

This interconnectedness is reinforced in AVEPRO's guidelines for evaluation, indicating that 'Quality Assurance supports the development of a quality culture' (AVEPRO 2019b, 6). The next sections will show how this paradoxical conundrum has been managed in practice by the Agency.

Separation of QA/QE activities

Quality assurance and quality promotion are addressed in separate sections in the 2021–2025 strategic plan (AVEPRO 2021) and are specified a number of times as two separate pillars: 'this strategy contributes to strengthen the other pillar of AVEPRO's activity, which is the promotion of a quality culture' (AVEPRO 2019c, 26). The concept of the two pillars is reinforced in the Agency's statement that it 'operates autonomously in relation to its two main activities, as defined in its mission statement, namely the evaluation and promotion of Quality' (AVEPRO 2019c, 40). This siloed framework can be paralleled with OrgA approach 1 in Table 1, encouraging a structural separation of QA and QE activities in practice.

Hints of temporal separation can also be found in the documents. AVEPRO's self-assessment report for the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), to which it needs to show alignment with the ESG, notes that:

the Agency also needs to complete its "maturation process" with the aim of increasing its activities for "promotion" and "enhancement" of quality so to contribute to the further development of the whole system of Higher Education of the Holy See. This would imply supporting the shift from "just" compliance towards a quality culture which allows to embed a strategic vision in the Institutions' planning and operations. (AVEPRO 2019c, 72)

This excerpt should be considered in the light of the earlier days of AVEPRO where there was a greater focus on QA activities:

This version of the AVEPRO Strategic Plan marks the **second major phase** in the evolution of the organisation. The first phase was characterised by a gentle, low key, non-threatening and sensitive approach which has progressively assumed the gradual acceptance and embedding QA in the mind-set and operations of the Holy See, and in its affiliated universities, institutes and faculties. (AVEPRO 2021, 3, original emphasis)

Integrative relationship between QA and QE

Based on the previous findings, AVEPRO seems to have adopted a separative approach when dealing with QA/QE processes. However, AVEPRO refers to a 'virtuous circle' combining evaluation and promotion (AVEPRO 2019c, 26). The entwinement of QA and QE is reflected in specific parts of the AVEPRO's evaluation process. The quality assessment process set up by AVEPRO contains elements of the classic model of external quality reviews depicted by Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995), with a self-evaluation by the institution of the quality of its operations, a report presenting the results of the self-assessment, an expert panel assigned to the external review, a visit to the institution and a subsequent panel report with commendations and recommendations. AVEPRO's review cycle is presented in Figure 2 below. Middlehurst and Woodhouse recognized this type of evaluation process as the 'model for both accountability and improvement' (Middlehurst and Woodhouse 1995, 264). While typically the expert report marks the end of the current evaluation cycle, in the case of AVEPRO reviewed institutions must also provide a Quality Improvement Plan based on the findings from the external panel six months after the visit. This document is meant for EHIs to reflect on the evaluators' recommendations, judging whether they find them reasonable or not, and how they aim to implement them if applicable. These elements will then feed into the elaboration of their strategic plan, which they will have to implement ahead of the next visit. The close monitoring and multiple reporting elements depicted in Figure 2 are not considered as multiple evaluation touchpoints.

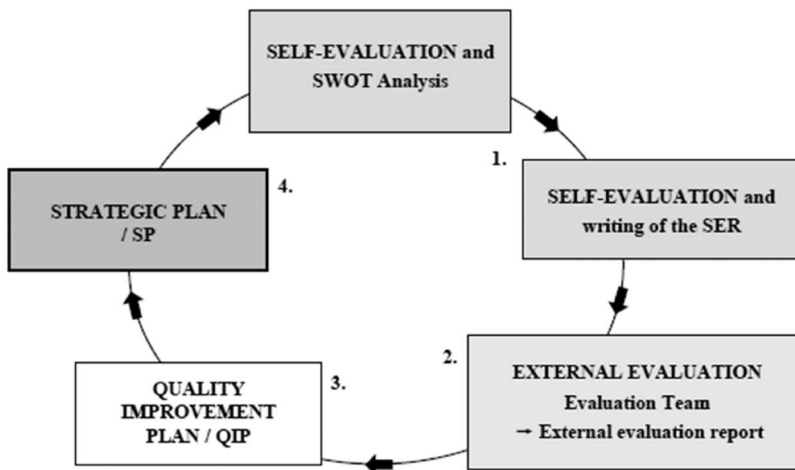


Figure 2. Evaluation cycle for ecclesiastical higher education institutions (AVEPRO 2019d, 8).

Rather it is referred to as a dialogue between reviewers and reviewees, with a nonstop enhancement mindset: ‘the promotion of quality will not be constituted of quasi-bureaucratic episodes of assessment, but will be oriented to each Institution’s endeavours to achieve continuous improvement’ (AVEPRO 2019d, 9). In a similar manner, the question ‘How can we change for the better?’ concludes the list of fundamental questions that the institution is invited to answer when preparing an evaluation that should be ‘clearly improvement-oriented’ (AVEPRO 2019b, 10–11). Furthermore, the Agency considers its role to support institutions in the implementation of ‘a QA-oriented change process’ (AVEPRO 2019c, 54). QA and QE are therefore clearly stated here as interwoven in the same cycle and feed each other in a nearly continuous manner.

This integrative perspective to QA/QE processes can be paralleled to integrative OrgA since integration is a fundamental element of this approach. As previously discussed, innovation is the other key tenet of integrative OrgA, and innovative processes and activities appear in the studied documents, as will be shown next.

Innovations in QA and QE processes

Two elements can be underlined within AVEPRO’s organizational structure and activities which can be depicted as innovative, and therefore linked to integrative OrgA. The first innovative and distinctive element of AVEPRO’s modus operandi derives from the use of volunteers to conduct the reviews, who are pro-bono experts from across the globe who graciously offer their services and time to support the Church, rather than paid quality professionals as is the case in many EQA settings. This way the Agency can pull a significant number of reviewers at limited costs. The second creative feature resides in the Agency’s proactive search for partners in each country where it operates. In order to facilitate institutional reviews, AVEPRO has developed a ‘regional/national procedure model’ (AVEPRO n.d.) whereby EHIs based in one country or region will be evaluated at the same time, with the support of local stakeholders when appropriate. The Agency leverages the wide network of Church-bound authorities to support the evaluations, such as episcopal conferences and rectors’ conferences, as well as national QA agencies and ministries. Their participation allows for more efficiency through the use of local resources in service of the Church, and contributes to a better understanding of the local context. This unique collaborative model, in turn, feeds both quality assurance and quality enhancement processes: ‘this [quality evaluation] strategy contributes to strengthen the other pillar of AVEPRO’s activity, which is the promotion of a quality culture’ (AVEPRO 2019c, 26).

Discussion

The findings provide evidence of the intricacy of the QA and QE relationships in AVEPRO's context. On one hand some claims recognized that the two must be separated, while on the other hand the Agency developed a discourse and processes for external and internal quality management that tend to interrelate the two. A level of tension between the two concepts was therefore manifest from this dual discourse and organizational design. The documentary analysis highlights AVEPRO as an organization with an ambidextrous profile for its management of QA and QE mandates. However the organization is not an ideal-typical case of an institution using one specific OrgA approach. Indeed, both structural and temporal separation are depicted in the texts, as well as simultaneous synergies between the two. This appears in itself paradoxical. It can however be interpreted as a current state vs. future state of development of the Agency, as denoted in its latest strategic plan with the move from a first to a second phase of development. AVEPRO is indeed currently in an incongruous phase of being in charge of evaluating the EHIs on an internal quality assurance system that it helps itself to develop by educating its actors on quality concepts and processes. The QA process as it stands now implies that AVEPRO is also advising institutions on the enhancement of their educational activities and operational practices when preparing for the next evaluation cycle.

Context-specific elements can explain this 'judge and party' situation. The development of a quality culture within EHIs is new for many of them. If institutions based in countries with national QA systems or included in larger universities with existing internal QA processes may be more accustomed to it, many others did not have to set up such a quality system until the international expansion of AVEPRO's remit in 2019, and are not experienced with quality assurance and strategic planning processes (de Wit et al. 2018, xv; Davies 2022, 73). This cultural change coupled with the unknown around the nature and purpose of quality assurance led to an initial pushback from some institutions (AVEPRO 2019b; Hunter and Sparnon 2017). There was therefore a need for the whole ecclesiastical higher education system to be externally guided in the development of a quality culture. Put simply, quality promotion was needed for quality assurance to happen. In the envisioned future state of the Agency, there is an explicit goal to step away from this initial support to develop quality management systems and quality culture within institutions (AVEPRO 2021). The organizational design around QA/QE process may therefore evolve and move towards a clearer 'both/and' or 'either/or' model. This confirms the view that ambidexterity is not a static balancing situation, and can change over time (Cunha, Bednarek, and Smith 2019).

The presence of innovative elements in the Agency's texts is also context-specific. The Agency's unique setting within a large international higher education system, where it needs to address 'legal, linguistic, organisational and logistical complexities' (AVEPRO 2019c, 4) seems to call for the development of innovative solutions with the aim of pursuing its dual mandate. As pointed out by John L. Davies, a creative mindset is a necessary dimension to counter threats to an institution's long-term sustainability (Davies 2022), particularly in complex contexts such as the Holy See's higher education sector. These innovations are also linked to a necessity to compensate for the limited financial and human resources of the Agency, with a moderate budget and only 4 full-time staff members to cover a worldwide scope (Vettori et al. 2019, 22; AVEPRO 2019c, 4). According to the OrgA literature, in the case of resource constraint, managing tensions within organizations would normally mean a trade-off or a separation between two sets of activities (Cao, Gedajlovic, and Zhang 2009; Papachroni, Heracleous, and Paroutis 2015). Yet, in the case of AVEPRO pragmatic solutions have been developed to handle the QA and QE poles in a synergistic manner.

Limitations and concluding remarks

This study investigated how AVEPRO approached and managed the tensions stemming from the seemingly paradoxical nature of its mandate. A paradoxical lens was used to link the literature on

quality assurance and enhancement with OrgA theory, in an effort to explore the Agency's attempt to provide both QA and QE activities. The subsequent documentary analysis of AVEPRO's operations and strategy suggests that the Agency does not represent a perfect case of an ambidextrous organization based on either structural separation, temporal separation or synthesis. Rather, it showcases a distinct example of an organization that aims to develop innovative structure that can be considered ambidextrous, reconciling QA and QE through different channels, simultaneously separating and integrating the two.

This study was only on the basis of publicly available documents and further research could be conducted to look at the actual implementation in practice of the organizational design described in the texts, and determine whether AVEPRO has in effect developed in an ambidextrous manner. This study has used AVEPRO and related documents at face value, and further research would be valuable to juxtapose the Agency's intentions with the lived reality of the reviewed institutions and of the reviewers. Another limit, or rather a potential academic critique, arises from the choice of developing a heuristic framework combining OrgA theory with the QA/QE domain. This method was chosen in an effort to most appropriately respond to the research question, but one could argue that it adds to the tendency observed by Birkinshaw and Gupta (2013) to apply the ambidexterity concept to all sorts of phenomena, moving away from its initial intent.

Yet, despite these limitations, this study empirically contributes to the paradox and organizational ambidexterity literature, in particular the less studied integrative OrgA model. It also provides worthy insights on the development of external quality assurance agencies in Europe. Indeed, QA agencies are 'in-between' organizations (Elken and Stensaker 2022) that must adapt to imposed mandates, which are often 'vaguely defined' (El-Khawas 2013, 250) and prone to change depending on the context in which they operate. Adopting an ambidextrous organizational mindset can permit better performance at the organizational level and quicker adaptation to change. This appears even more relevant in what has become a competitive context of external quality assurance in the EHEA. Higher education institutions have the choice to select evaluation agencies outside the country where they are based, generating a 'marketization' of EQAs (Dakovic and Gover 2021). Even if the roll-out of this rule is not fully effective yet in all EHEA countries, an agency with an ambidextrous setting may be better positioned to respond to the specific quality-related needs of institutions. Longitudinal investigations looking at ambidexterity signs at different agencies would provide further insights into the change patterns in the field and potentially provide best practices to replicate.

Disclosure statement

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Annex

Annex 1. List of documents reviewed.

Name of Document	Author	Date	Link
Annex 4 SWOT Analysis	AVEPRO	2019	www.avepro.glauco.it/avepro/allegati/910/Annex%204_SWOT%20Analysis.pdf
Strategic Plan 2015–2019	AVEPRO	2015	http://www.avepro.glauco.it/avepro/allegati/910/93_Strategic%20Plan%20updated%202019.pdf
Strategic Plan 2021–2025	AVEPRO	2021	www.avepro.glauco.it/pls/cec/v3_s2ew_consultazione.mostra_pagina?id_pagina=1061
Guidelines: Nature, context, purpose, standards and procedures of quality evaluation and promotion	AVEPRO	2019	www.avepro.glauco.it/avepro/allegati/1133/A_Guidelines%20AVEPRO%202019.pdf
The ecclesiastical higher education system in the global world – The rationale of AVEPRO's evaluation system	AVEPRO	2019	www.avepro.glauco.it/avepro/allegati/1133/E_AVEPRO-Rationale_2019.pdf
ENQA Review Self-Assessment Report	AVEPRO	2019	www.avepro.glauco.it/avepro/allegati/910/AVEPRO_SAR%202019.pdf