

AVEPRO

A. GUIDELINES:
NATURE, CONTEXT, PURPOSE, STANDARDS
AND PROCEDURES OF
QUALITY EVALUATION AND PROMOTION

“AVEPRO GUIDELINES 2019”





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Presentation of the document within the context of the *AVEPRO Guidelines*

This document is part of **a set of guidelines proposed by the Agency, constituting an initial general document**, which contextualizes the whole quality evaluation process. The other guidelines deal more in-depth with the topics introduced in this essential first document.

A. *Guidelines: Nature, context, purpose, standards and procedures of Quality Evaluation* (in short: *AVEPRO Guidelines*)



B. *Guidelines for SELF-EVALUATION*



C. *Guidelines for EXTERNAL EVALUATION*



D. *Guidelines on STRATEGIC PLANNING*



E. *The Ecclesiastical Higher Education System in the global world* ***The RATIONALE of AVEPRO'S EVALUATION SYSTEM***

► Introduction

The *Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties* - AVEPRO was established on 19 September 2007 by His Holiness Benedict XVI. The idea of creating an Agency came from the Congregation for Catholic Education following the Holy See's adhesion to the Bologna Process in 2003. The aim was to strengthen the focus on academic quality through the implementation of new tools and procedures suited to current needs. Moreover, as encouraged by the Bologna Process and subsequently by the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Agency cooperates with Institutions as part of a common effort to harmonize the various higher education systems.

After the Agency's first decade of activity, various factors have brought about a series of innovations that AVEPRO will seek to translate into Guidelines for the ecclesiastic academic Institutions. These include the publication of the Apostolic Constitution regarding all ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, "*Veritatis Gaudium*"; the revision of the Agency's Statute; the new version of the European Standard and Guidelines / ESG¹; the ever growing system of dialogue and cooperation with the Congregation for Catholic Education and the authorities of the academic Institutions; the need, voiced by Universities and Faculties, to deal with questions such as the Strategic Plan and processes of

¹ ENQA/ESU/EUA-EURASHE, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area/ESG*, 2015.



reorganization; and requests for AVEPRO to coordinate evaluations in (ecclesiastical and Catholic) academic Institutions in continents beyond Europe. This set of factors has impacted the context and areas of the Agency's activities in many ways.

• **The innovations introduced by the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium***

The document *Veritatis Gaudium* should be considered as continuing along the lines drawn by the previous Apostolic Constitution regulating ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, *Sapientia Christiana* (1979). This connection between them is not abstract but effective, in that the text of the Foreword to the 1979 Constitution is included within *Veritatis Gaudium*.

Veritatis Gaudium should therefore be seen as a sort of evolution and continuation in relation to the previous normative framework. Certain changes are present and it can be argued that *Veritatis Gaudium* is “a forward looking text”: it suggests some directions for the Institutions to take, it leaves them the freedom (and the responsibility) to add the contents and methods necessary to achieve their objectives and implement the suggestions present in the text. In other words, **what changes is not the subject of the academic activity (“what” needs to be done), but the “how” on the basis of the “why” it must be done:**

WHY → WHAT → HOW

In this context the **concept of “quality” takes on a new meaning, dimensions in which it is realized and criteria for its evaluation.**

In particular, the criteria for evaluation of the ecclesiastical Faculties can be found in the objectives contained in *Veritatis Gaudium* (Art. 3), substantially reiterating those listed in *Sapientia Christiana*, i.e. (§1) “through scientific research to cultivate and promote their own disciplines, i.e. those directly or indirectly connected with Christian revelation or which directly serve the mission of the Church, and therefore especially to deepen knowledge of Christian revelation and of matters connected with it, to enunciate systematically the truths contained therein, to consider in the light of revelation the most recent progress of the sciences, and to present them to the people of the present day in a manner adapted to various cultures”

Moreover, “to train the students to a level of high qualification in their own disciplines, according to Catholic doctrine, to prepare them properly to face their tasks, and to promote the continuing permanent education of the ministers of the Church” (art. 3§2) and “to collaborate intensely, in accordance with their own nature and in close communion with the Hierarchy, with the local and the universal Church the whole work of evangelization” (art. 3§3).

The Apostolic Constitution encourages reflection on the great changes of our era and motivates us to deal with the anthropological and environmental crisis that we are experiencing, with the hope of promoting a change in our developmental model: “the problem is that we still lack the culture necessary to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths. This vast and pressing task requires, on the cultural level of academic training and scientific study, a broad and generous effort at a radical paradigm shift, or rather – dare I say – at «a bold cultural revolution»” (*Veritatis Gaudium*, Foreword 3).



The Foreword also defines **four fundamental criteria**, which themselves form the basis for the evaluation of the ecclesiastical academic Institutions; they are:

- ➡ **the missionary identity and return to Kerygma**, i.e. the essence of the Christian revelation
- ➡ **wide-ranging dialogue** “not as a tactical approach” but as a “culture of encounter”
- ➡ **multi-disciplinarity, inter-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity**, i.e. seeking to transcend the boundaries of knowledge and scientific information
- ➡ **networking**, taking advantage of the positive and enriching contribution of peripheral elements.

Due to these principles the concept of quality must be assessed not only in relation to teaching but also to research, the third mission and all the academic Institutions’ activities of management and governance.

Regarding research in particular, *Veritatis Gaudium* claims: “Indispensable in this regard is the establishment of new and qualified centres of research where – as I proposed in *Laudato Si’*² – scholars from different religious universities and from different scientific fields can interact with responsible freedom and mutual transparency [...] In all countries, universities constitute the main centres of scientific research for the advancement of knowledge and of society; they play a decisive role in economic social and cultural development, especially in a time like our own, marked as it is by rapid, constant and far-reaching changes in the fields of science and technology. International agreements also take account of the vital responsibility of universities for research policies and the need to coordinate them by creating networks of specialized centres in order to facilitate, not least, the mobility of researchers” (*Veritatis Gaudium*, Foreword 5).

Lastly, this Apostolic Constitution mentions AVEPRO as the body to which responsibility is delegated for the evaluation of “Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, as well as the other institutions of higher education” belonging to the Holy See’s Higher Education System (Norms of Application, Part one, Section one, art. 1 §2).

These guidelines are therefore intended to provide academic Institutions with a general framework within which to define, plan and conduct the evaluation of quality, in the light of both the normative provisions regulating the subject and international recommendations regarding the implementation of the various initiatives to which the Holy See adheres.

• The new AVEPRO guidelines in the light of the innovations introduced by the ESG 2015

Before introducing some important “evolutions” in the AVEPRO Guidelines, partly following the publication of the ESG 2015, it is worth pointing out that the main aim of the Agency’s Guidelines, similarly to those drawn up in 2009, is to ensure a common and unitary orientation for all ecclesiastical academic Institutions both in Europe and internationally, while maintaining a level of general applicability sufficient to respect the diversities and characteristics of the individual Institutions in their own specific contexts. Hence they apply to the ecclesiastical University Institutions under the guidance of AVEPRO, which operates in an international dimension in line with the Universal vocation of the Church (art. 4 §1 Statutes) and therefore in a not solely European but global context.

However, the ecclesiastical academic Institutions present in Europe are an integral part of a process that is seeking to harmonize the higher education systems present on the continent, while respecting diversity and specific characteristics. The Holy See is part of this process,

2 FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* (24 May 2015).



implying both the expression of a political will and the creation of a “regional” system, which may also become a model of reference for ecclesiastical academic Institutions around the world.

Quality, or rather **Quality Assurance**, is a means used in the service of creating the European Higher Education Area / EHEA. The progress achieved over the last decade has mainly concerned the system of “trust” and cooperation that has arisen between Institutions and Agencies within the framework of the various systems of evaluation. This change, **from a system of “control” to a system of accountability and hence the promotion of quality** has been effectively expressed within the ESG 2015, where in particular 4 aims are specified:

1. define a common framework for quality assurance systems regarding learning and teaching at European, national and institutional levels
2. enable the assurance and improvement of quality in higher education
3. foster mutual trust to facilitate recognition and mobility within and between individual countries
4. provide information regarding quality assurance in the EHEA.

In short, these aims express a desire to confirm and consolidate the progress achieved in the decade 2005-2015.

Four fundamental principles are then proposed:

1. higher education **Institutions have primary responsibility for the quality** (and its assurance) of the didactic services they provide;
2. **Quality Assurance takes into account the diversity among higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students;**
3. **Quality Assurance supports the development of a quality culture;**
4. **Quality Assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society in general.**

AVEPRO adds further principles to the above (which were already partly included in its 2009 Guidelines) and grants specific importance to “**continuous improvement**”, as ensured by strategic planning and the implementation of the External Evaluation Team’s recommendations.

The Agency also highlights the **centrality of students and of learning processes in relation to teaching**, an issue adopted within the didactic methods used in ecclesiastical academic Institutions.

Considering the Agency’s universal vocation, AVEPRO has updated its own Guidelines, also in line with the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice (revised edition of 2016)³.

• Context and general principles of evaluation

Quality evaluation is one of the key elements of the Bologna Process and is therefore essential to the development of a European Higher Education Area / EHEA. In announcements issued over time, Ministers have reconfirmed their commitment to

³ INQAAHE, *Guidelines of Good Practice (revised version)*, 2016.



supporting the further development of quality promotion at institutional, national and international levels, and have underlined that the **primary responsibility for the evaluation of quality lies with the Institutions themselves.**

In line with the ESG 2015, the system proposed by AVEPRO foresees a coherent quality policy based precisely on the conviction that Institutions are responsible for the development of their internal quality: with the active contribution of students, Institutions must control and evaluate all their activities, including study programmes, the organization and volume of research, innovation, management, funding systems and services. Their procedures must promote academic and organizational quality, develop a culture of quality, reduce bureaucracy, have a good cost-effectiveness ratio, and avoid excessive rule-making. Consequently, external evaluation procedures should therefore ascertain, via site visits, that internal quality evaluation processes have been correct and effective.

AVEPRO is aware of the complexity of the challenges it faces. The Agency needs to support the ecclesiastical Institutions in Europe to ensure that they achieve an appropriate position in the world of higher education via the development of an efficient and coherent process of quality promotion that is based on constant improvement, supports a culture of quality in all activities, and meets the European standards and guidelines.

A further complexity is constituted by the fact that the ecclesiastical Institutions are spread across 18 European countries, in which 15 different languages are spoken. They are also characterised by significant differences in terms of size, organization, specific mission, cultural background and national context, but can nonetheless be subdivided into four main groups:

- Pontifical Universities
- Independent Institutions with one or more Faculties
- Institutions with one or more Faculties within Catholic Universities
- Institutions with one or more Faculties within State Universities.

Many of the above are responsible for the academic qualifications issued by and the quality processes of a large number of affiliated, aggregated or incorporated Institutes or Centres.

Many Institutions are required to meet accreditation criteria at regional or national level that involve detailed reports and evaluations. This can generate a mentality that erroneously associates accreditation with the current concept of quality evaluation.

Whenever possible, AVEPRO quality initiatives will be organized in a harmony with specific local requirements. However, the integrity of AVEPRO's quality processes must be maintained without compromising on key objectives.



- **Summary and value of the Process**

SELF-EVALUATION and SWOT Analysis

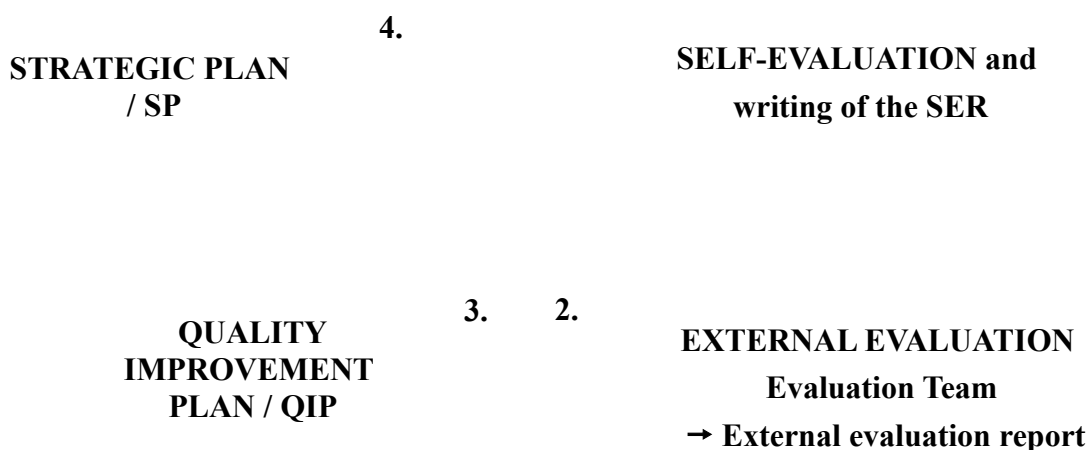


Figure 1 - General summary of the cycle of Quality Assurance

The quality evaluation process should be considered a **cyclic, common and continuous activity**, within which the following phases can be distinguished:

- ➔ **INTERNAL evaluation or SELF-EVALUATION (1.)**
- ➔ **EXTERNAL evaluation (2.)**
- ➔ **Quality improvement plan / QIP (3.)**
- ➔ **Strategic planning (4.)**

The starting point of the process is the **INTERNAL EVALUATION (SELF-EVALUATION) of quality**, which gives Institutions the opportunity to conduct a critical self-evaluation and appraisal of the work done by its various components, and to learn about the viewpoints of students and other users of the services they provide.

The work consists of the preparation of a **Self-Evaluation Report / SER** containing both perceptions, such as the opinions of those who work and study at the Institution regarding its strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis), and objective information (the statistical data contained in the annexes). The emphasis is on **reflection, participation, analysis and self-appraisal**.

The SER is for the exclusive use of the Institution itself and the External Evaluation Team and is not published (in contrast to the External Evaluation Report drawn up by the External Evaluation Team). This will encourage Institutions to be critical in their self-evaluation (which can sometimes be difficult) and, better still, to examine their consciences.



The integrity of the process and colleagues' viewpoints will always be respected during Self-Evaluation. All those involved in the process must demonstrate an approach characterised by listening and respect. It is important to always bear in mind that "The University or Faculty is community" and "all the people [in it] ... are ... co-responsible for the common good" (*Veritatis Gaudium*, art. 11), as well as for the cohesion of the academic community.

In line with consolidated international good practice and the provisions of the ESG, following self-evaluation **AVEPRO will organize an external evaluation of every ecclesiastical Institution** to verify the efficacy of its internal quality systems. The procedures employed for external evaluation will be proportional to the size of the Institutions involved and reflect those used in the internal evaluation.

In short, therefore:

- the Institution prepares a **Self-Evaluation Report / SER** using a method agreed upon with AVEPRO
- AVEPRO appoints a group of international experts (**Evaluation Team**) to analyse the SER, visit the Institution for one or more days (**site visit**) and write a Report, which will be published (**External Evaluation Report**)
- the External Evaluation Report will show the fundamental importance of institutional quality promotion policies and make recommendations for improvements. The Report includes remarks upon the validity and precision of the SER, verifies any proposals for the Institution's development and provides recommendations for further actions
- the Institution prepares a **Quality Improvement Plan / QIP** based on the External Evaluation Report, and AVEPRO monitors its progress in implementing the Plan
- the Institution draws up a **Strategic Plan / SP** based on the guidelines proposed by AVEPRO
- the Strategic Plan **must be monitored on a regular basis** by the Institution itself, while **its implementation effectively launches the subsequent cycle of evaluation**
- a **new cycle of evaluation** begins: the Institution prepares a new SWOT analysis, with particular reference to the implementation of the Strategic Plan, and begins drawing up a new Self-Evaluation Report
- **External quality evaluation does not end with the publication of the relative Report but will prompt structured follow-up procedures** with the aim of ensuring that the recommendations are given due consideration and that **Strategic Plans are drawn up and effectively implemented**.

Thus 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.

The accreditation of all ecclesiastical academic Institutions remains the competence of the Congregation for Catholic Education, as do any administrative decisions. The Congregation reserves the right to take corrective actions, if necessary, in the light of problems emerging from the External Evaluation Report.

► Part 1 – SELF-EVALUATION

1. The INTERNAL EVALUATION process

As established in the first principle of the ESG 2015, the primary responsibility for the process of Quality Assurance lies with the individual Institutions.

The commitment Institutions are required to make to begin the process of self-evaluation represents an opportunity to promote a **culture of continuous monitoring of their own quality**. In line with the proposals of the ESG 2015, this approach should be part of a precise “management strategy” that is formalized and made public (see **ESG 2015 1.1**), as well as ensuring the involvement of stakeholders (i.e. all those involved inside the Institution, including staff and students, as well as all those involved externally).

In ensuring the development of a “culture of quality”, as desired by the ESG 2015, the **Quality Improvement Plan / QIP** plays a fundamental role as, consequently, does **the Academic Institution’s strategic planning, proposed in AVEPRO’s model of evaluation**. Policies for internal quality assurance should therefore take into consideration certain fundamental aspects:

- the design and approval of study programmes (**ESG 2015, 1.2**);
- the centrality of students in relation to learning, teaching and assessment (**ESG 2015, 1.3**);
- control of all phases of students’ experience: admission, progression, recognition and certification (**ESG 2015, 1.4**);
- modes of recruitment, professional development and appraisal for teaching staff (**ESG 2015, 1.5**);
- monitoring of didactic resources and support for students (**ESG 2015, 1.6**);
- information management (**ESG 2015, 1.7**);
- the publication of information (**ESG 2015, 1.8**);
- ongoing monitoring and periodical review of programmes (**ESG 2015, 1.9**);
- cyclical external quality assurance (**ESG 2015, 1.10**).

This process and the procedures deriving from it apply to all academic Institutions, Universities and Athenaeums, Faculties, Institutions and services.

Further to the above, the process of evaluation and quality improvement answers four fundamental questions. These also form the basis of the EUA’s institutional evaluation programme:

WHAT are we trying to do?

HOW are we trying to do it?

HOW do we know if it works?

HOW can we change for the better?

These questions prompt reflection upon the mission, purposes, objectives and strategic priorities, upon the systems and procedures in use and their fitness to achieve the mission, as well as what type of measures are usually implemented, including feedback from students, staff, employers and all other stakeholders, not to mention the procedures for strategic planning, including the capacity to change and meet new challenges.



The experience gained in the last years both by the Agency and internationally suggest that the process should be as inclusive and shared as possible and manage to stimulate a **fruitful combination of the top-down approach** (actively involving the leadership) **and bottom-up approach** (recognition of the sense of belonging to an academic community among all those who are involved in the ecclesiastical academic Institution in some way and participate in the process).

Lastly, another key issue is that the **approach to self-evaluation and appraisal must be simple, valid and flexible, as well as being relatively easy to put into practice and clearly improvement-oriented.**

2. Institutional apparatus for quality promotion

An indispensable first step in the organization of a quality evaluation process is the **creation of a suitable internal apparatus within each individual unit.**

Experience demonstrates that:

- a high profile **Quality Committee** should be created and refer to the academic Senate, to supervise the quality processes, organize monitoring of them, and establish and maintain strong leadership in this area
- the **President of this Committee** should be appointed by the Rector
- all members of the **Committee** should be motivated by belief in a culture of quality
- the Committee must have the unconditioned and clearly visible support of the Institutional leaders, otherwise staff interest will wane and work not progress
- the executive role (including the supervision of the Quality Committee) must be filled by a **Director of Quality Promotion** and a **Quality Office** created within the Institution, which needs adequate resources at its disposal to support the work of the Director
- the Director should be a high profile member of the academic community and the secretary of the Quality Committee and hence have a strong role in the formulation of quality policies
- the Institution should develop a **sound database of institutional results in various sectors**: the admission and progress of students, production in the field of research, study programmes, and so on
- this apparatus should ensure that pro-quality activities are closely related to the strategic planning procedures, which are fundamental to common action.

Naturally, many ecclesiastical Institutions are small in size: in such cases, appropriate adjustments to the above model should be dictated by common sense.

The tasks of the Quality Office are as follows:

- provide support to the Quality Committee for the development of institutional policy in the field of quality promotion and assurance, in line with international good practices
- carry forward initiatives promoted by the Quality Committee aimed at resolving problems that emerge during the processes of self-evaluation
- support the Quality Committee in promoting a sense of belonging in all units of the system called upon to contribute to quality evaluation and improvement
- support the Departments and various Sectors/Services in the implementation of internal and external quality evaluation processes



- work with other Institutions and AVEPRO to improve cooperation in the promotion of quality.

3. Self-Evaluation Report/SER

Thanks to the process of internal quality evaluation, the Institution has an opportunity to conduct a critical self-evaluation and review of the work it has carried out, as well as getting to know the point of view of students and other users of its various services.

Once the process of internal quality evaluation has been completed, the results are contained in a SER (which constitutes a written summary of the whole process conducted by the Institution), prepared according to the AVEPRO Guidelines.

The SER is a document of fundamental importance to the Institution (and for the process of quality evaluation), as it reports in detail the work and activities carried out, focusing in particular on reflection, analysis and constructive self-criticism.

Moreover, the process is useful for the Institution as:

- it presents detailed information about the Institution, its mission, functions and activities, and the collective perceptions of staff and students of their role, not only in the university but in social and cultural development and, where appropriate, in the international community
- it presents a succinct but comprehensive statement of the Institution's view of its strategic objectives and capacity to achieve them
- it shows the quality procedures which are already in place and permits an assessment of their effectiveness
- it provides a comprehensive and self-critical analysis of the Institution's activities
- it helps the Institution to identify and analyse its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and allows it to put forward appropriate remedies
- it identifies the weaknesses and shortcomings in management, procedural, organizational and other matters (including teaching and learning, research and interaction with civil society), which are under the direct control of the Institution and which can be remedied internally
- it provides a framework within which the Institution can continue to work in the future towards quality improvement
- findings are validated by external international standards
- **it facilitates the preparation of a QIP and, subsequently, the definition of a Strategic Plan,** which determine the policies to be followed in the quest for continuous quality improvement.

The following points (3.1-3.4) provide a series of data regarding the SER; for further information (including a model SER) please refer to the AVEPRO document specifically dedicated to this subject: *Guidelines for Self-Evaluation*⁴.

⁴ AVEPRO, *Guidelines for Self-Evaluation*, 2019.

3.1 Preparation of the SER

The **Quality Committee** meets a few months before the start of the self-evaluation process. This group should include the President of the Quality Committee, some permanent members of the Faculty, either the Rector or the Vice-Rector, as well as a representative of the students and of the technical and administrative staff.

The Committee should be structured effectively, in order to **organize the process of self-evaluation** by establishing a **schedule of meetings**, the **modes of collection of the various contributions required** and the **preparation of the SER**.

3.2 Consultation within the Institution: SWOT analysis and updating of the Institution's Strategic Plan

It is important for the success of the internal evaluation process that all members of the Institution be kept fully informed about the details of the self-evaluation as it progresses, especially at the initial planning stage. Thorough consultation with all institutional staff is advised; they should be encouraged to study these guidelines, to discuss the operational aspects of the process, and to consider their various implications.

Not all staff may be equally enthusiastic but, as far as possible, all should be encouraged to participate. The more the self-evaluation procedures are discussed and the further colleagues become involved, the more effective efforts to raise awareness of quality will be. Thus, staff and students will come into direct contact with the culture of quality and this will gradually lead to the development of a virtuous circle at all levels of the Institution. The culture of quality will therefore become an integral part even of routine procedures.

It has been amply proven that **the involvement of students and (teaching and non-teaching) staff in the SWOT analysis is fundamental**.

In-depth and shared observation of the viewpoints of the whole academic community is essential to identifying which areas represent sources of criticality (definite or potential, i.e. weaknesses or threats) or, on the other hand, the Institution's positive defining traits (strengths and opportunities).

This participation is also fundamental in defining and monitoring the progress of strategic planning.

As mentioned previously, evaluation and strategic planning are closely connected. The two phases are reciprocally linked and **the SWOT analysis constitutes the starting point of both processes**.

Obviously, Institutions that have already prepared a previous Strategic Plan will review the SWOT analysis already conducted during its preparation. Indeed, all Institutions are requested not to increase their workload but rather to optimize their use of the time and resources at their disposal by not commencing the evaluation process from a hypothetical "zero" starting point, but **updating and proceeding with the work already done in the previous evaluation cycle or the contents of their Strategic Plan when already prepared**.

3.3 Questionnaires and data analysis

Some of the data for the SER is collected via questionnaires completed by students, staff, graduates, employers and other users. A collection of model questionnaires is available on the AVEPRO website. **This collection is neither definitive nor complete and is only intended as a guide**. Individual Institutions may have special characteristics that

need to be taken into consideration.

As well as this type of data, the Institutions will be asked for a set of “statistical and numerical” information, which will be included in the **annexes to the SER**.

This data will regard the various dimensions of Institutional life (numbers of students, teaching staff, publications, average hours of teaching, average time to attainment of qualifications, budget and resources available, funds for research). It will not only represent a “photograph” of the state of the Institution, but must be considered as supporting material to that contained in the SWOT analysis and the rest of the SER.

In short, first the Institution itself and subsequently the External Evaluation Team must verify the coherence and congruence between the “**perceptive**” **evaluation** that will mainly emerge from the SWOT analysis and the “**objective**” **analysis and evaluation** deriving from the careful observation of what can be understood from the data provided.

3.4 Writing of the Self-Evaluation Report

When writing the SER the Quality Committee should bear in mind the importance of **providing a critical analysis of all aspects of the Institution’s work**, as opposed to a mere listing of factual information and of opinions obtained from questionnaires. The SER should emphasize strengths, effective responses to problems, the ability to grasp opportunities, as well as weaknesses and risks.

As the aim is the improvement of quality, the formulation of strategies and proposals to improve the Institution’s work needs to be highlighted.

The weaknesses most frequently encountered by Institutions (also non-ecclesiastical ones) when preparing the SER are generally of three types:

- academic, procedural, organizational and other matters that are completely under the control of the Institution itself
- shortcomings in services and procedures that are beyond the control of the Institution
- inadequate levels of staffing, facilities, equipment and other resources that require capital or recurrent investment for improvement.

The **recommendations and validation provided by the visit of the External Evaluation Team** (see Part 2) will become important elements for discussion within the Institution in the follow-up and QIP phase.

► Part 2 – EXTERNAL EVALUATION

4. Remarks on the external evaluation process

The external evaluation phase constitutes a key moment in the model proposed by AVEPRO. The Team appointed by the Agency has the task of verifying the correctness of the contents of the SER, analysing the data provided and speaking to people, in order to understand in more detail whether the Institution’s vision and mission can be translated into a concrete strategy for the continuous improvement of quality. The visit must be carried out in a spirit of mutual cooperation, attention and respect between the Institution and the Team.

The Team has a very delicate task, as the **External Evaluation Report** represents the



most visible “product” of the whole process. Indeed, while the SER remains “private”, the External Evaluation Report is sent to the Grand Chancellor of the Institution and the Congregation for Catholic Education, and is published on the Agency’s website.

The Report must contain an analysis of the SER and other elements arising from meetings and provide realistic recommendations that are clearly expressed and in line with the Institution’s vision and mission, i.e. not generalised, but functional to the improvement of quality.

The **external evaluation process** can be divided into 5 phases:

- **preparation of the site visit**
- **carrying out the site visit**

- **preparation of the External Evaluation Report**
- **review of the External Evaluation Report by the Institution**

- **External Evaluation Report is sent to AVEPRO and published**

Preparation of the visit involves organization of the Evaluation Team’s travel, board and lodging, and a place in which they can work. In this phase the Institution makes travel arrangements for all members of the Evaluation Team and agrees upon a schedule for the visit with the President.

The visit itself involves the Team staying for a variable number of days, depending upon the size of the Institution (generally from a minimum of a day and a half for a single Faculty, and about 3 days for a University with more than one Faculty), during which time it visits the Institution, interviews members of the community and is granted maximum freedom by the Institution regarding the possibility to consult materials, view facilities and especially interact with people. At the end of the visit the Team presents to the Institution (and to all members of the academic community) its preliminary results and the recommendations it intends to make when drawing up its Evaluation Report.

The Report should be prepared over a period of 6 weeks following the visit. The President has the task of reviewing the text and ensuring the use of appropriate language and form.

In the subsequent phase the Report is sent by the President of the Evaluation Team to the Rector/Head/Dean.

The Institution has 2 weeks in which to review the Report, comment upon it and correct any formal mistakes, or to produce an annex to accompany the final version of the Report, if appropriate. If the Institution has no comments to make, it informs the President of the Evaluation Team, who sends the definitive version of the Report to AVEPRO. As mentioned above, the Agency then sends the final version of the Report to the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Grand Chancellor, and publishes it on the AVEPRO website.

In line with the AVEPRO guidelines, this phase is **followed by the preparation of a QIP** and subsequently a **new Strategic Plan**.

4.1 Characteristics of the External Evaluation Team appointed by AVEPRO

The External Evaluation Team is appointed by AVEPRO following careful selection from among the experts in the Agency's database. The composition of the Team varies according to the size of the Institution to be evaluated, but in general comprises a President, one student and one or more "thematic" experts.

The criteria used to form the Team seek to ensure, as far as possible, the presence of experts with "technical" competence, i.e. experts in the subject or subjects that characterise the Institution's teaching and research. Moreover, efforts are made to use experts who have familiarity with management and leadership practices, as well as knowledge of the main processes and procedures of Quality Assurance.

Lastly, considering the international vocation of the Holy See's Higher Education system, efforts are made to appoint a President of a different nationality from the country in which the Institution is situated, who also possesses the necessary linguistic competence to read and comprehend the SER and interact easily with the academic community during the visit.

4.2 The site visit

During the phase of preparation for the site visit, the Institution:

- agrees on a schedule with the President of the Team appointed by AVEPRO, at least 5 weeks prior to the visit; the details are then made available to the whole academic community, teaching and technical and administrative staff and students;
- contacts all members of the Evaluation Team to make travel and local accommodation arrangements for the experts;
- makes available any documents (e.g. management reports, financial and budgeting reports, PhD theses, sample examination papers for the previous three years) or any other material that the Team deems relevant;
- arranges appropriate facilities where the Team can meet, discuss and begin to draw up the Report.

The objectives of the Evaluation Team are to:

- clarify and verify details of the SER
- verify how well the mission, aims and objectives of the Institution are being fulfilled, having regard to the available resources, and comment on the appropriateness of the Institution's mission, objectives and Strategic Plan
- confirm - or not - the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats presented in the SER
- list the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats not identified in the SER
- check the suitability of the working environment
- comment on the actions for improving quality proposed in the SER
- make recommendations for improvement in order of priority, but with due consideration for the availability of resources.

The External Evaluation Team has the following tasks:

- study the SER
- visit the Institution
- clarify and verify details in the SER, and examine other relevant documentation



- evaluate the Institution's activities in the light of the SER
- prepare a draft Evaluation Report and illustrate the main findings in a presentation to staff and students
- write the definitive version of the External Evaluation Report and deliver it to the Institution within six weeks from the end of the site visit.

During the site visit the External Evaluation Team should (as time allows):

- meet with the heads of governance, the Quality Committee of the Institution, members of the academic and service staff, students, the administrative management, graduates, employers and representatives of all categories of users of the Institution's services, including representatives of external stakeholders;
- visit the facilities related to the Institution's activities (lecture rooms, labs, offices, library, etc.).

When the site visit is over no member of the Institution should have contact with the External Evaluation Team on matters relating to the evaluation process.

4.3 The External Evaluation Report

In keeping with the formative nature of the process, the External Evaluation Team expresses its recommendations in a positive manner, aimed at encouraging quality improvement. This approach is in keeping with the spirit of a process in which cooperation and trust ensure that real enhancement can result.

In its Evaluation Report the External Evaluation Team must:

- confirm and comment on the details of the SER
- provide an overview of the present state of the Institution
- comment briefly on each aspect of the Institution's activities
- acknowledge achievements and their quality
- point out unambiguously any deficiencies or inadequacies in management and operations that might be eliminated or ameliorated
- identify any evident limitations to resources that hinder the implementation of strategies for improvement
- comment on all plans for improvements in the SER
- emphasize the proposals for improvement included in the SER that the Team considers appropriate.

For the sake of simplicity and easy reading, the Report should be **written in Italian or English**. In particular cases in which this is not possible, and following specific agreements on the matter between AVEPRO and the Institution, the Report can also be written in another language. It must be **prepared according to the Agency's guidelines** and above all **specify, without any ambiguity, which recommendations the Team intends to make to the Institution, listing them in order of priority and achievability**.

AVEPRO will ask the Team to produce a brief summary of the Report containing its main remarks and recommendations to the Institution in either Italian or English to facilitate the diffusion of the results and ensure broad access to the information.



4.4 Review of the External Evaluation Report by the Institution and appeal procedure

Once the External Evaluation Report has been drawn up by the AVEPRO-appointed Team, the President sends a copy to the Rector/Head/Dean. The Institution has two weeks in which to read the Report and correct any formal or factual mistakes.

The Institution may prepare observations regarding the Evaluation Report and send them to the President of the Team, who will include them in the final version of the Report in the form of an annex.

Two weeks after the Report has been sent to the Institution, the President of the External Evaluation Team then sends the Report to AVEPRO and the Agency sends a copy to the Grand Chancellor of the Institution and the Congregation for Catholic Education, as well as publishing the final version on its website.

While the Evaluation Reports do not imply the adoption of formal decisions (such as institutional accreditation, which is the exclusive competence of the Congregation for Catholic Education), an Institution that finds serious and motivated reasons for the Report to be revised can appeal against its publication online by sending a written notice detailing its case to AVEPRO within 2 weeks of its receipt of the Report. AVEPRO will postpone publication and submit the Report and the appeal to the Agency's Scientific Council, which may suggest solutions (e.g. the appointment of a new Evaluation Team, the partial or complete rewriting of the Report) or declare the objections raised to be groundless.

► Part 3 – What happens after evaluation?

5. Follow-up

In line with the best practices in use around the world (ENQA, EUA, INQAAHE), the model of evaluation suggested by AVEPRO requires that the external evaluation phase be followed by a follow-up process with three main aims:

1. to evaluate the feasibility and appropriateness of the recommendations made by the AVEPRO-appointed Team and contained in the External Evaluation Report
2. to launch common reflection leading to the definition of a Strategic Plan, in accordance with the Agency's guidelines
3. to monitor the implementation of strategic planning and update the Institution's SWOT analysis in order to launch a new cycle of evaluation, leading to the production of a new SER (thus triggering the start of the new cycle).

The instruments with which these aims are to be achieved are:

- the **Quality Improvement Plan / QIP** → to be drawn up within 6 months from the conclusion of the External Evaluation Report, following the AVEPRO guidelines;
- the Institution's **Strategic Plan / SP** → to be drawn up within 12 months from the conclusion of the External Evaluation Report.

6. The Quality Improvement Plan / QIP

The QIP is a document intended to **consider exclusively the recommendations made by the Evaluation Team.**

It can be drawn up using a table with three columns: the first containing the recommendations made by the External Evaluation Team; the second indicating the Institution's level of agreement with the recommendations (e.g. whether they are accepted in their entirety, in part, or not at all); and the third column providing the reasons why the recommendations are not deemed useful or cannot be accepted, or, alternatively, the ways in which they will be implemented, as well as the timescale for starting and possibly completing the process, and who will be in charge of the necessary work.

7. The Strategic Plan / SP and launch of a new cycle of evaluation

The evaluation process can be considered concluded when the Institution has drawn up and approved its Strategic Plan.

AVEPRO has produced guidelines for the Institutions, which, it is important to reiterate, are ultimately responsible for the process of quality improvement. The guidelines contain suggestions and advice, but it is up to the Institutions to adapt these to their own needs, dimensions and situations.

While the **preparation of the Strategic Plan concludes a cycle of evaluation, its implementation and monitoring mark the start of the subsequent cycle.** The quality process is therefore cyclical and continuous. The new SER will take as its starting point a critical review of what has been achieved thanks to the Strategic Plan, and how.

8. Chart summarizing the evaluation cycle (as resulting from good practices)

EVALUATION CYCLE		
Who	What	When
➔ INSTITUTION	Appointment of the institutional apparatus – Quality Committee/QC and Quality Office – for the entire QA Process	18 months prior to the site visit
	Launch of SELF-EVALUATION and SWOT ANALYSIS	12 months prior to the site visit
	Conclusion of SELF-EVALUATION PREPARATION of the SER	6 months prior to the site visit
	Sending the SER to AVEPRO	3 months prior to the site visit
➔ AVEPRO	Appointment of the External Evaluation Team	at least 2 months prior to the site visit
➔ INSTITUTION and Evaluation TEAM	Establishment of date for site visit (contacts between the Institution and members of the Evaluation Team)	at least 7 weeks prior to the site visit

EVALUATION CYCLE		
Who	What	When
➡ AVEPRO	SER is sent to the Evaluation Team	at least 6 weeks prior to the site visit
➡ Evaluation TEAM	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analysis of the SER (using SER analysis FORM)• Exchange of ideas regarding unanswered questions and issues to be dealt with during the site visit (among Team members)	from 6 weeks prior to the site visit
➡ INSTITUTION	Organization of Evaluation Team’s travel and logistical arrangements	5 weeks prior to the site visit
➡ INSTITUTION and Evaluation TEAM	Definition of a schedule for the visit	
➡ Evaluation TEAM	SITE VISIT by the EXTERNAL EVALUATION TEAM	
	Evaluation Team draws up the Evaluation Report	within 6 weeks from the end of the visit
	Final draft of the Evaluation Report is sent to the Institution by the President of the Evaluation Team	
➡ INSTITUTION	Any factual corrections to the Evaluation Report are sent to the President of the Evaluation Team within 2 weeks of receipt of the Report → In the case of objections deemed substantial by the Institution, appeal regarding the contents of the Report (see the dedicated section of this document and point 4.4 of the AVEPRO Guidelines)	within 8 weeks from the end of the site visit (within 2 weeks of receipt of the Report) → in the case of appeal against the Report, the timeline changes
➡ Evaluation TEAM	The President of the Evaluation Team sends the Evaluation Report to AVEPRO (definitive version)	within 8 weeks from the end of the site visit
➡ AVEPRO	The Evaluation Report is sent to the authorities: the Congregation for Catholic Education/CCE, the Grand Chancellor and any other academic authorities (Dean, Head, Rector), then published on the Agency’s website	within 10 weeks from the end of the site visit
➡ INSTITUTION	QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PLAN/QIP Preparation of the Quality Improvement Plan	within 6 months from the end of the site visit
	STRATEGIC PLAN/SP	within 12 months from the end of the site

EVALUATION CYCLE		
Who	What	When
	Preparation and approval of the Strategic Plan	visit
	Confirmation or appointment of the members of the Quality Committee and Quality Office	at least 18 months prior to the new site visit

Table 1 – *Timeline* the evaluation cycle

► Part 4 – AVEPRO: Evaluation of the Agency

AVEPRO's Statutes and the main good practices adopted internationally also require **Agencies to regularly undergo a form of evaluation**. In particular, the ESG 2015 suggest that Quality Evaluation Agencies implement self-evaluation procedures, including:

- internal quality evaluation procedures, comprising a feedback mechanism to gather the reactions and opinions of staff and governing bodies
- an internal mechanism of reflection, or in other words actions related to the recommendations for improvement
- an external feedback mechanism, or in other words the means to gather the reactions and opinions of the members of the Evaluation Teams and the Institutions visited for the Agency's future development and improvement.

The ESG also require an external review of the Agency's activities and processes at least once every five years.

The procedures for this appraisal follow the steps foreseen for self-evaluation and appraisal by international experts. The results are documented in a Report that establishes to what extent the Agency evaluated complies with the European norms for quality evaluation Agencies.