



AVEPRO

ENQA Targeted Review 2025

SELF-EVALUATION REPORT

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PREFACE

“Macanudo!”

This expression, which can be translated into English from Castilian as ‘great’, indicates considerable satisfaction as a reaction to something that has been said or done. In Argentina, or rather, in some quarters of Buenos Aires, an encouragement to continue on the path indicated is also added to this translation and so the meaning becomes ‘great job, go ahead!’.

‘Macanudo’ was the word with which Pope Francis greeted the President of AVEPRO, Fr Armand Puig i Tàrrach, at the end of the private audience he granted to Fr. Armand on 4 March 2024. On that occasion, the President briefed the Holy Father on the Agency's work and presented the strategic directions that would shape AVEPRO's path and activities in the coming years. The discussion helped reinforce the understanding that AVEPRO's policies align with those of the Holy See and, more importantly, highlighted the significance of Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions. Indeed, it is quite rare for the leadership of a National QA Agency to be received by a Head of State, especially one whose responsibilities extend far beyond the administration of their own State or Nation.

This very point, namely Pope Francis' global responsibility, served as the key intersection with the competencies and mission of AVEPRO. The network of Higher Education Institutions under the Holy See operates worldwide, and after more than 15 years of experience in Europe, the Agency must extend its reach to other regions. This aligns with the Pope's call, reinforced by the Dicastery for Culture and Education (the Holy See's Ministry for education), to “go beyond” the old continent. AVEPRO has begun this expansion by focusing on the “promotion of Quality” (i.e. the second pillar) which, alongside evaluation, forms the foundation of its work. In 2024, this mission took us to the United States, Colombia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where we engaged with over 50 academic institutions through meetings, dialogue, and active listening.

While new challenges lie ahead, we must not lose sight of our origins or the role of Europe as a laboratory of innovation. The maturity of institutions, the well-established QA agencies, and the strong network of relationships, fostered in part by AVEPRO's membership in ENQA, serve as key strengths, allowing us to share best practices and experiences with other regions. At the core of this process remains the unique identity of an Agency that has continuously reflected on itself, implementing improvement policies informed by evaluations and valuable exchanges with colleagues (and friends) within the ENQA community.

For these reasons, AVEPRO will integrate this report, the Panel's recommendations, and the SWOT analysis into the development of its future Strategic Plan. Expectations are high, and we extend our deep gratitude to both ENQA and the Panel for their valuable encouragement and support in enhancing our work.

1. BACKGROUND

On 19 September 2025, AVEPRO will turn 18. In many countries this represents the age when one becomes an 'adult' and enters a new phase of life. Ideally, the Agency is also on this path, having reached a maturity and solidity recognised by many. ENQA has played a central role in this process. AVEPRO sent its request for 'associated' status to ENQA less than 60 days after its establishment. This letter, sent to the ENQA Board on 12 December 2007, was followed by others that were extremely significant for the Agency, i.e. the application for full-member status, first sent in 2013, obtained in 2014 and confirmed in 2020.

The Agency's global vocation was clear from the very first moments of activity but the European dimension represented the test, or perhaps the 'stress test', that AVEPRO had to undergo in order to structure its methodology, understand and exercise its role in the service of Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions.

1.1 AVEPRO's jurisdiction: The Holy See's HE System

According to the Apostolic constitution *Veritatis gaudium*¹ the terms “ecclesiastical Universities” and “Faculties” refer to those Institutions of Higher Education which have been canonically erected or approved by the Apostolic See, which have the right to confer academic degrees by the authority of the Holy See². Ecclesiastical Faculties can be part of either an Ecclesiastical University or a Catholic University; or a Public or private University not belonging to the Catholic Church; or it can be an autonomous Institution.

Ecclesiastical Institutes can be either “affiliated” to a Faculty and award first-cycle degrees; or “aggregated” to a Faculty and award first- and second-cycle degrees; or they can be “incorporated” in a Faculty and award second- and/or third-cycle degrees³.

The Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences (HIRS) award first- and second-cycle degrees as associates of a Faculty of Theology, providing study programmes which better meet the needs of contemporary society (see: CCE, Reform of the Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences, art. 3)⁴. Faculty Centres are classified as Institutes “*ad instar facultatis*” and provide grants.

Interestingly, the different types of Institutions are defined on the basis of the organisational structure, the plan/programme of studies that is provided, and the related academic degrees that are awarded⁵.

¹ *Veritatis gaudium*, Section I, “Nature and Purpose of Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties”.

² *Veritatis gaudium*, General Norms, Part I, art. 2 §2.

³ For more details about ecclesiastical degrees and qualifications see the following cap. 3.3.2 “Degrees and other Qualifications in a QA perspective”.

⁴ CCE, Reform of the Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences, 28 June 2008.

⁵ *Veritatis gaudium*, Section X, Strategic Planning and Cooperation of Faculties, art. 62, § 2.

As highlighted in the “Requirements” column, Ecclesiastical Universities are required to have not less than four Faculties, while Ecclesiastical Athenaeums are required to have three Faculties (Theology, Canon Law and Philosophy are not compulsory). It is important to mention that the current *Veritatis gaudium* Constitution has brought about an important innovation as regards the revised plan of studies for Universities and Athenaeums. Whilst in the prescriptions of the previous “*Sapientia christiana*” Constitution (1979) it was stated that Faculties of Theology, Philosophy and Canon Law had to be in place for an Institute to be proclaimed “University”, under the current reformed system (2018) the running of these Faculties is not required by rule any longer.

The variety of HEIs characterising the ecclesiastical academic scenario is clearly unique:

Type of HEI	Requirements	Diplomas and degrees
UNIVERSITY	Four Ecclesiastical Faculties are needed to erect canonically an Ecclesiastical University	Three cycles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baccalaureate • Licentiate • Doctorate
ATHENAEUMS	Three Ecclesiastical Faculties are needed to erect canonically an Ecclesiastical Athenaeum	Three cycles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baccalaureate • Licentiate • Doctorate
SINGLE FACULTIES	Besides the Faculties of Theology, Canon Law, and Philosophy, other Faculties have been or can be canonically erected, according to the needs of the Church and with a view to attaining certain goals. For instance: <i>Christian Archaeology; Bioethics; Social Communications; Law; Christian and Classical Letters; Liturgy; Missiology; Sacred Music; Ancient Near Eastern Studies; Psychology; Educational Sciences; Religious Sciences; Social Sciences; Spirituality; Church History; Arabic and Islamic Studies; Biblical Studies; Oriental Studies; Studies on Marriage and the Family</i>	Three cycles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baccalaureate • Licentiate • Doctorate
FACULTIES WITHIN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES or other STATE/PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES	Faculties erected or approved by the CCE which operate in the frame of a Catholic University or in another Institute of Higher Studies	Three cycles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baccalaureate • Licentiate • Doctorate
AFFILIATED	Ecclesiastical Faculties	First-cycle degrees
AGGREGATED	Ecclesiastical Faculties	First- and Second-cycle degrees
INCORPORATED	Ecclesiastical Faculties	Second- and Third-cycle degrees
HIRS/ Higher Institutes of Religious Studies	HIRS are connected to a theological Faculty, which guarantees the quality of academic level and which confers the qualifications; the HIRS differs from the theological Faculty, because the study of religious sciences and the study of theology have different formative teachings and curricula.	First- and Second-cycle degrees

Table 1 The Variety of HEIs characterising the Ecclesiastical Academic Scenario

Ecclesiastical HEIs are located in five continents. At the global scale, the Dicastery for Culture and Education indicates the presence of around 800 Institutions of Higher Education, comprising 290 ecclesiastical Faculties and 510 “academic entities” related to them (affiliated, aggregated, incorporated and HIRS⁶):

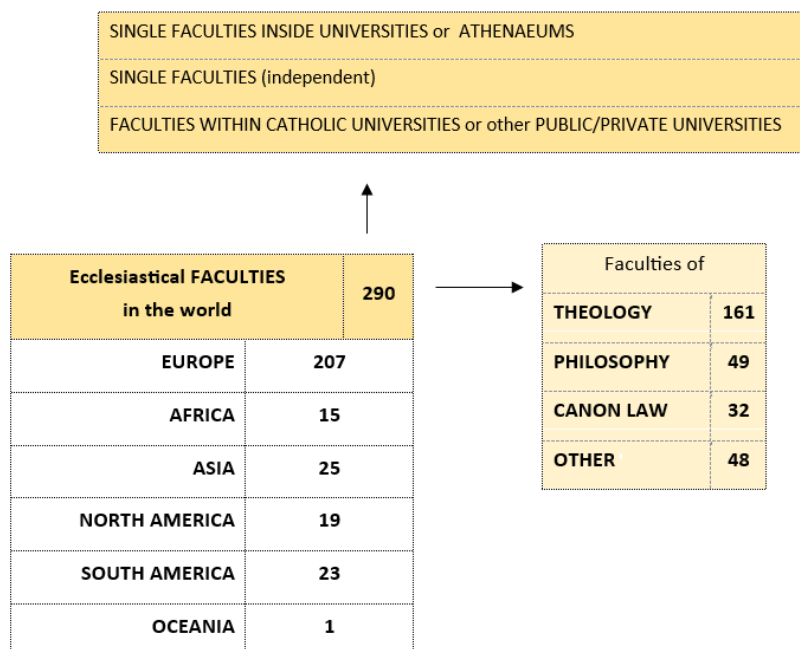


Figure 1 The Key Figures of the Ecclesiastical Academic Scenario

The ecclesiastical Faculties are the main beneficiaries of the Agency’s activities, with respect to quality evaluation and promotion.

1.2 The role pf AVEPRO within the complex HE system of the Holy See

The Agency first had to define and make its identity recognisable. AVEPRO has unique characteristics: some 300 academic institutions to be evaluated, practically all of them geographically located outside the territory of the Vatican City State, it has no power of accreditation, it does not produce binding decisions, it is oriented towards improvement and strategic planning, it operates in multiple languages, thus ensuring multilingualism while respecting local sensitivities. This framework of complexity was understood by the experts who participated in the panels appointed by ENQA.

Having acquired full membership has enabled the Agency to collaborate with other European Agencies by, for example, signing agreements and organising joint visits. These characteristics, together with its global vocation, represent elements of AVEPRO's identity.

The maturation process and having reached almost 18 years of age impose a new quality leap for the Agency. In other words, we are about to embark on a journey that will take us further and further outside Europe. The challenges will involve a constant search for flexibility and adaptation to different contexts, the preservation of methodological rigour in combination with environmental, social and structural characteristics of the higher education systems that respond to extremely heterogeneous continental, regional or local needs.

⁶ Data for 2017.

For these reasons, the Agency chose to use the opportunity offered by this self-assessment report not only to cover those ESG standards against which it was partially compliant in 2020, but also to take its cue from the reflections that have taken place in recent years within the Board of Directors and the Scientific Council and to reflect on how to invest its resources in the coming years.

In order to accomplish this task, it is necessary to reconnect the threads with events and experiences gained in recent years. The reference concerns aspects that have specifically affected the Agency, the Roman Curia or the world as a whole, as in the case of COVID-19.

1.3 Development of the SER

In October 2024, AVEPRO took the first steps to accomplish the ENQA targeted review and structured the dedicated steering group dealing with the evaluation process. This group included the President and the Director of the Agency, two members of the Scientific Council (Caty Duykaerts and Peter Jonkers), and two consultants (Elisa Mancinelli and John Davies, the latter previously a member of the same Council from its inception until 2024, and acted as the initial consultant setting up AVEPRO). The group prepared a first draft of the report, organised the data collection for the SWOT analysis and presented the draft to the members of the Board of Directors. Two members of the Board, Achim Hopbach and Anthony McClaran, who have extensive experience in leading QA Agencies, critically reviewed the SER before the final version was drafted and submitted to the Board for approval, followed by its subsequent submission to ENQA.

Over the course of six months, a structured and collaborative process unfolded, guiding the development of a key report. The journey began with foundational steps, as the Steering Committee was defined and the Working Group was organised. These initial stages laid the groundwork for what was to come. As the months progressed, the framework of the report started to take shape. The Table of Contents was carefully outlined, ensuring a coherent structure, while a SWOT analysis grid was distributed to the Agency's Boards' members, to facilitate a thorough evaluation. Soon after, the actual writing of the report commenced, marking a significant milestone in the process. By the time the calendar turned to the new year, the first draft of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) had emerged. This was followed by an in-depth SWOT data analysis, which added valuable insights to the document. An expert review further refined the draft, leading to a second version that incorporated informed feedback and improvements. As the final months approached, discussions for advice took place, providing an opportunity for collective reflection and fine-tuning. The process culminated in the submission of the SER to ENQA, the ultimate step in this meticulous and collaborative endeavor.

Throughout this timeline, not only did the dedicated working group play a crucial role, but the entire AVEPRO staff, alongside other stakeholders, contributed their perspectives and expertise, ensuring the document was both comprehensive and reflective of a shared vision. The following chart outlines the different steps:

Activities	OCT '24	NOV	DEC	JAN '25	FEB	MAR
Steering Committee definition						
Organisation of the Working Group						
Definition of the Table of Contents						
Forwarding the SWOT analysis grid						
Start of report writing						
First SER draft						
SWOT data analysis						
Expert Review						
Second SER draft						
Discussion for advice						
SER submitted to ENQA						

Figure 2 Steps to Develop the 2025 SER

1.4 Changes and developments since the 2019 Full Review and the 2022 ENQA Progress Visit

The main changes in the Agency between the 2019 visit and the 2022 follow-up concerned both 'exogenous' factors affecting the Agency's work and 'endogenous' / internal developments.

Exogenous factors

With respect to the **external influences**, the Covid-19 crisis and the disruption to education systems it brought worldwide affected ecclesiastical academic institutions' and AVEPRO's activities in many ways. Assessment visits were delayed or even suspended; HEIs' operational conditions had to be strengthened when struggling financially due to decreased enrollment or lack of funding; the shift to remote working required the adoption of new digital tools and methods, while virtual site visits and evaluations introduced challenges to maintaining the same level of quality and reliability in assessments.

Like many other organisations, AVEPRO introduced special procedures to manage the emergency and adapted its approach to ensure continuity while drawing important lessons for future QA strategies in ecclesiastical higher education. These lessons point to several key strategic priorities.

The Holy See's ecclesiastical academic institutions demonstrated remarkable responsiveness by quickly transitioning to remote procedures. Within a matter of weeks, or even days, universities and faculties ensured the continuity of attendance, management, and organisational functions, maintaining a strong commitment to their educational missions.

The pandemic also highlighted the need for continued global dialogue and the creation of **networks**, despite restrictions on mobility. As universities are inherently global endeavours, technology and remote meetings offer cost-effective ways to sustain internationalisation.

In light of the impending economic crisis, mergers within Catholic higher education institutions are likely, or at least an enhanced focus on global networks will be essential to strengthen institutional capacity. AVEPRO suggests that ecclesiastical higher education should focus on impact-driven, socially sustainable goals.

It was also reaffirmed that a university, as a **physical community** of scholars and students, remains the preferred model for high-quality higher education. Entrepreneurial models that proposed replacing degrees with stackable credit units or narrowing the scope of higher education to professional training proved inadequate in the face of the pandemic's challenges. This situation reinforced the importance of in-person academic experiences as a cornerstone of educational quality.

Furthermore, the **digital revolution**, particularly through generative AI, is reshaping learning mechanisms and quality assurance methodologies. AVEPRO urges that the revised version of the ESG, to be adopted at the upcoming Ministerial Conference of the EHEA, considers the profound changes initiated by the pandemic, which may not yet be fully visible but will significantly shape the future of higher education. **Technology** has emerged as a valuable complement to traditional face-to-face instruction and is now a permanent fixture in education. The pandemic presented an opportunity to redefine pedagogy and foster more collaborative learning models. Institutions must embrace this shift by developing a clear strategy that aligns with their mission and goals. The integration of education-friendly technology enhances inclusion and cooperation, but it also requires faculty training in digital

tools. Additionally, physical spaces and infrastructure must be adapted, moving away from lecture-based environments towards those that encourage creativity and knowledge sharing.

The war in Ukraine also represents a massive exogenous factor affecting AVEPRO. The Theology Faculty of Lviv, which the Agency oversees, has been struggling to maintain its internationalisation efforts; furthermore, the displacement of millions of people, including students and academics, has placed ecclesiastical HEIs in neighbouring countries (such as Poland and Lithuania) in a position where they must respond rapidly to provide support. Many institutions have offered aid to Ukrainian students, researchers and professors, affecting the consolidated practices also related to QA assessment.

Endogenous factors

As regards **internal influences and developments**, the Agency has sought a strengthened cooperation with its Scientific Council and the redefinition of priorities in agreement with the new Dicastery for Culture and Education. Some changes have become 'structural', contributing to a renewed identity for the Agency, such as the innovative role of the Scientific Council's Working Groups and the increased focus on academic institutions outside Europe. AVEPRO's stakeholders, including the ecclesiastical HEIs, have been informed and updated about these developments through direct communications with the Agency's Secretariat and the publication of documents on the Agency's website.

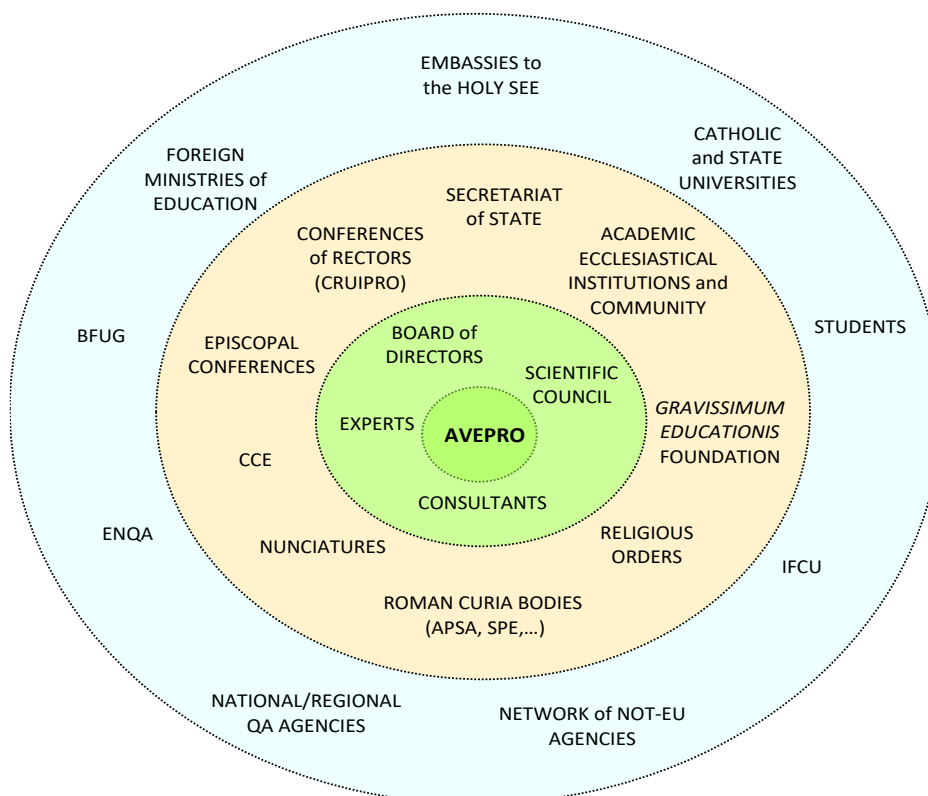


Figure 3 The Map of AVEPRO'S Stakeholders

The efforts of the Working Groups have led to the development of new documents that we have termed 'position statements', i.e. non-binding agency documents. Published on the Agency's website, in the

“Documentation” page⁷, and promoted to the HEIs through direct mailing, these position statements are available to the academic community for deeper reflection, to institutions aiming to further refine the concept of quality, and to the experts appointed to the commissions who wish to explore innovative aspects of the concept of quality. Additionally, these documents serve to promote a culture of quality, a mission that has been central to the Agency since its foundation.

As elicited in the guidelines for the SERs (tackled further on in §2.1 “Consideration of internal Quality Assurance”), the focus of these documents is on topics such as research, the definition of research strategies, the third mission, and the societal impact of academic institutions. They also deal with the regulations governing the ecclesiastical faculties, the tension between the high values and objectives set out in the Foreword of *Veritatis Gaudium*, and the concrete possibilities of implementation in the light of the application regulations of the same Apostolic Constitution.

The changes that have occurred since the follow-up visit in October 2022 have, in some respects, resulted in discontinuities from the previous period, as envisaged by the ENQA experts during and after their onsite visit to the Agency.

The three key elements to be highlighted are:

- The Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* on the Roman Curia.
- The establishment of the Dicastery for Culture and Education with renewed goals and objectives.
- The new leadership of the Agency and the definition of the new President's mandate.

1.5 An insight into the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*

The Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, promulgated by Pope Francis on March 19, 2022, marks a significant moment in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in how it structures and organises the Holy See's Institutions. This document is a response to the ongoing need for reform in the Catholic Church's central administrative apparatus, with a strong emphasis on missionary work, transparency, and accountability. The Constitution seeks to implement the vision Pope Francis outlined during his papacy for a more collegial, collaborative, and servant-oriented approach to the governance of the Church. It was announced nearly a decade after Pope Francis first began calling for reform within the Vatican and it is the culmination of these efforts, following the 2014 creation of the Council of Cardinals (C9) tasked with advising the Pope on curial reform.

A path of reforms now accomplished⁸

The Constitution introduces a comprehensive reorganisation of the Roman Curia, the central body of administrative entities that assist the Pope in governing the Church. Several existing offices are merged or restructured to streamline decision-making and ensure that the Curia better reflects the Church's mission.

Among the significant innovations is the establishment of the **Dicastery for Culture and Education**, a key institution that reflects Pope Francis' vision of a Church that is more connected to the pastoral, cultural, and educational realities of the contemporary world. This new Dicastery, formed by the merger of two previously separate entities – the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Pontifical Council for Culture – embodies the reform's emphasis on integrated and collaborative leadership. A key aspect of this reform is to stress the transformative power of culture and education in fostering human dignity,

⁷ <https://www.avepro.va/documentation/?lang=en>

⁸ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-06/apostolic-praedicate-evangelium-editorial-by-andrea-tornielli.html> (last access: 05/03/2025)

promoting the common good, and engaging with contemporary challenges. This new structure with an updated mission has generated an impact on AVEPRO and the concept of Quality that the Agency proposes.

In this context, academic institutions are encouraged to engage more actively with society, redefining their role and emphasising, for instance, the significance of their third mission. Consequently, evaluation must also expand its scope to include topics beyond the traditional responsibilities of academia. This is consistent with Pope Francis' *Magisterium*, which has continually sought to move the Church (meaning Universities and Ecclesiastical Faculties too) toward a more outward-facing role. The Church is called to engage with society not merely in a clerical, bureaucratic manner, but as a living, dynamic force for love and justice in the world.

The Dicastery also has an important role in fostering interreligious and intercultural dialogue. In an increasingly globalised and multicultural world, the Church is called to engage with people of various faiths and cultural backgrounds. Through dialogue and collaboration, the Church can contribute to building a culture of peace, mutual understanding, and respect for human rights.

Additionally, the Dicastery is tasked with ensuring that Catholic educational institutions around the world promote a vision of education that is in harmony with the principles of the Church's social teaching, including the promotion of social justice, human dignity, and solidarity. In this sense, education becomes a powerful tool for social transformation and the promotion of the Gospel values.

Another important aspect of *Praedicate Evangelium* is its call for **enhanced transparency and accountability** within the Curia. The document introduces provisions that require greater openness in the decision-making process and the handling of financial matters. By emphasising transparency, Pope Francis aims to ensure that the Curia operates with integrity. Finally, it promotes greater collaboration and collegiality within the Church. The papacy has been a symbol of centralization of power, but Pope Francis has consistently emphasised the need for shared responsibility and decision-making. The Constitution seeks to make the Roman Curia less hierarchical and more collaborative, bringing different members of the Church, including laypeople, into the process of governance. While these reforms will take time to be fully realised, *Praedicate Evangelium* marks an important moment in the history of the Church and reflects Pope Francis' ongoing vision for a more humble, transparent, and mission-focused Universal Church.

Two other elements of the *Praedicate Evangelium* are relevant to AVEPRO, specifically related to Articles 107, 241, and 247.

Article 107 introduces the concept of the 'fraternal visitation' as distinct from the 'apostolic visitation'. The practice of the fraternal visitation is reminiscent in many respects of the methodology proposed by AVEPRO. Evaluation visits (like those indicated in this article of the apostolic constitution) do not directly generate a decision, but facilitate reflection, awareness and paths of improvement.

Article 241 states that "*There are certain institutions, either of ancient origin or more recent establishment, that, albeit not part of the Roman Curia in the strict sense and having their own juridical personality, nevertheless provide a variety of useful or necessary services to the Roman Pontiff, the Roman Curia and the universal Church, and are in some way associated with the Curia itself*". These institutions associated to the Curia are then listed.

In **Article 247** AVEPRO is explicitly mentioned: "*In order to promote and develop a culture of quality within academic institutions directly dependent on the Holy See and to ensure their quality standards*

are valid at the international level, the Holy See has established the Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties”.

It seems useful to emphasise how articles 241 and 247 determine, on the one hand, an acknowledgement of the work carried out by the Agency and, on the other hand, the growing importance that the promotion and evaluation of quality in Higher Education have in the strategic lines and activities of the Holy See. In other words, the decisions taken by Pope Francis on education and culture will have an impact on higher education systems for a long time. One of AVEPRO's tasks will be to promote a concept of quality in line with this vision, which places the integral development of each person at the centre.

Investing in dialogue and training

The innovations introduced by Praedicate Evangelium have produced not only changes in terms of the competencies assigned to the single Dicasteries and Bodies, but also novelties with regard to the mandate given to the leadership. Moreover, in the text of the Apostolic Constitution, the terms “to promote” or “promotion” recur almost 50 times. Beyond the semantic aspect, this can be understood as an invitation to the Curia and its related Bodies to invest heavily in dialogue, exchange, dissemination and training of the proposals that each individual body of the Curia holds as its responsibility. Within this framework, AVEPRO's action has been expanded along two lines, one of continuity with respect to the past, i.e. collaboration with the Dicastery for Culture and Education (in line with the excellent relations previously enjoyed with the Congregation for Catholic Education), and one of innovation by initiating the process of promoting quality in non-European contexts.

The new Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education met the President of AVEPRO on several occasions. During the meetings, the cordial and collaborative atmosphere favoured the exchange of information and mutual support in the implementation of a strategy consistent with the lines indicated by Pope Francis. One of the most recurring themes of these years of pontificate concerns the 'outgoing Church' or the reversal of a 'Roman-centric' approach. This approach suggested to the President of the Agency to define a path geared towards achieving two objectives: promoting the culture of quality proposed by AVEPRO in Africa, Asia and the Americas, and structuring a network of contacts with academic institutions in different continents.

With the support of the Agency's Scientific Council and the Board of Directors, and most notably, with the commendation expressed by Pope Francis to the President of AVEPRO, Fr. Armand Puig i Tàrrach, during a private audience on 4 March 2024, three quality promotion seminars were successfully conducted in 2024 (in Washington, D.C., Bogotá, and Kinshasa). An additional seminar is scheduled to take place in 2025 in Manila.

Clearly, the appointment of the new President marked a significant turning point for AVEPRO, transitioning it from a predominantly Europe-focused agency into a globally operating organisation. Subsequently, as outlined in the forthcoming strategic plan of the Agency which is expected to be developed following the ENQA panel's visit, it will be essential to address the follow-up of these extra-European processes while continuing to support evaluation activities within Europe.

1.6 The evolution of AVEPRO's operating philosophy about QA

The factors discussed in the previous sections have significant implications for AVEPRO's operating philosophy, which has evolved since 2019 to address emerging challenges and changing circumstances. Building on the stable foundation that has guided its activities since inception, the underlying principles of AVEPRO's approach have developed as follows:

- **Collaborative and supportive approach.** AVEPRO reaffirms its commitment to a non-adversarial style in its interactions with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The Agency seeks to foster genuinely collaborative and constructive relationships.
- **Guidelines and flexibility.** AVEPRO's provision of guidelines and position statements increasingly emphasises permissiveness and flexibility rather than rigid directives. This approach encourages HEIs to exercise creativity and adopt solutions aligned with the principle of "fitness for purpose."
- **Holistic Quality Assurance.** Academic programs for education and research achieve the highest quality within institutions where internal support frameworks and services are designed to work cohesively. AVEPRO advocates for a holistic approach to institutional quality assurance (QA), providing guidance on dimensions such as organisation, human resources, and resourcing to ensure integrated institutional operations.
- **Cultivating a QA culture.** AVEPRO seeks to instil a culture of QA in HEIs, emphasising that QA is not merely a collection of tools but a mindset and behavioural framework.
- **Outward engagement and social responsibility.** HEIs are increasingly expected to be outward-looking, influenced by the Papal Magisterium, societal expectations for greater social responsibility and engagement, and financial imperatives requiring diversified income sources. AVEPRO will support these goals by offering reviews, support and guidance services, and opportunities for networking during the upcoming planning period.
- **Future-oriented reviews.** AVEPRO prioritises the future of institutions over their past. This perspective underscores the importance of linking evaluations directly to strategic planning and action priorities.
- **Institutional sustainability.** AVEPRO places a strong focus on institutional sustainability, which includes program continuity, financial stability, and an updated staffing profile. To support this, the Agency encourages HEIs to develop capacity and resilience. It also advocates for increased inter-institutional collaboration, ranging from partnerships to federations and mergers, recognizing these as fundamental to achieving academic quality.

The combination of the principles listed above determines a developmental approach in which, both Higher Education Institutions and the Agency share a joint learning path.

2. FOCUS AND ENHANCEMENT AREAS IN THE ESG SCOPE

2.1 ESG 2.1 "Consideration of internal Quality Assurance"

The ESG definition

STANDARD:

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

The ENQA Panel recommendations

The panel commends AVEPRO for the handling of the unique challenge of doing justice to the requirements of the European Higher Education Areas while also considering the different needs of other regions across the globe.

The panel commends AVEPRO for its approach of not focusing on a criterion-centred approach in its promotion and evaluation, but instead clearly focus on the promotion of a quality culture that is dialogue oriented, involves feedback of different stakeholders including students, and treats the institution in its context and reflecting its mission.

Panel conclusion: fully compliant

The timeline

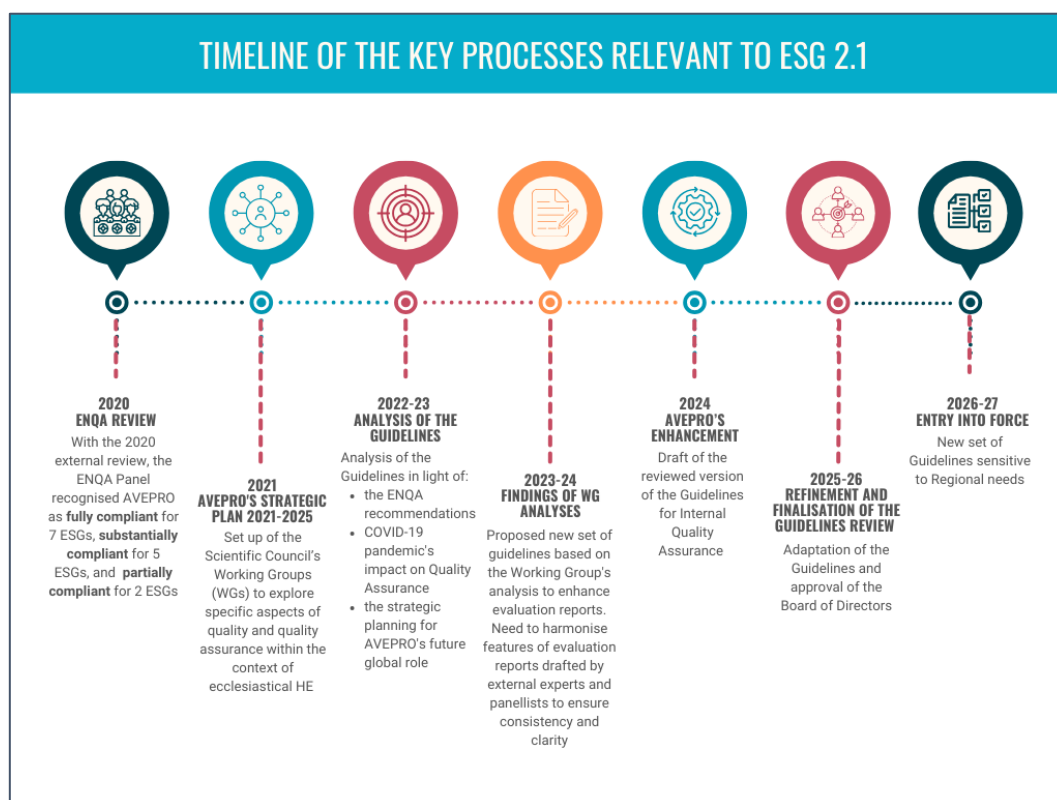


Figure 4 The Timeline of the Key Steps and Processes Relevant to ESG 2.1

AVEPRO's follow-up and critical reflection

In 2020, the panel appointed by ENQA considered the Agency fully compliant with respect to this Standard. In that occasion, and in order to clarify as much as possible the linkage between the ESG and AVEPRO's Guidelines, the Agency produced the following table:

ESG, 2015	AVEPRO "Guidelines for Self-Evaluation", 2019
Standards and Specific Elements	References
1.1 Policy for QA	§ "Introduction" § "Contents of the SER" "3. Quality Assurance/QA policies" § "SER and external evaluation visit" § "SER and strategic planning" § "SER Model" § Annexes to the SER: 1 - Faculty organigram
1.2 The design and approval of study programmes	§ "Contents of the SER" "4. General overview regarding programs: education, multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches" § "Contents of the SER" "5. Strategies and modes of learning and the centrality of students" § "Contents of the SER" "7. Learning and teaching: definition of study plans, their monitoring and review, appreciation of teaching staff" § "Contents of the SER" "8. Research and scholarship, support for the creation of research centers" {VG} ⁹ § "Contents of the SER" "10. Contributions to the outside world/third mission activities" {VG} § "Contents of the SER" "11. Policies for internationalization" {VG}
1.3 The centrality of students in relation to learning, teaching and assessment	"Preparation of the Self-Evaluation Report/SER" § "Consultation within the Institution" § "Contents of the SER" "5. Strategies and modes of learning and the centrality of students" § Annexes to the SER: 5 - Numbers of students; 6 - Number of newly enrolled students; 7 - Number of graduate students; 8 - Mean number of years to graduation; 9 - % of student withdrawal
1.4 Control of all phases of students' experience	§ "Contents of the SER" "7. Learning and teaching: definition of study plans, their monitoring and review, appreciation of teaching staff" § Annexes to the SER: 5 - Numbers of students; 6 - Number of newly enrolled students; 7 - Number of graduate students; 8 - Mean number of years to graduation; 9 - % of student withdrawal
1.5 Modes of recruitment, professional development and appraisal for teaching staff	§ "Contents of the SER" "7. Learning and teaching: definition of study plans, their monitoring and review, appreciation of teaching staff" § "Contents of the SER" "11. Policies for internationalization" § Annexes to the SER: 2 - Numbers of teaching staff; 3 - Mean age of teaching staff; 4 - Mean hours of teaching per week; 10 - Scientific production - Number of publications/contributions to conferences by teaching staff
1.6 Monitoring of didactic resources and support for students	Part 1 § 3.3 § "Preparation of the instruments (meetings, questionnaires, focus groups...)" § "Contents of the SER" "6. Support and services for students" § "Contents of the SER" "6. Support and services for students" § "Contents of the SER" "13. Policies and modes of governance, and management of resources available (structures, staff, economic and financial resources)" § Annexes to the SER: 11 - Economic/financial sources

⁹ Those are specific issues from the *Veritatis gaudium* that also matches the ESG standard.

ESG, 2015	AVEPRO "Guidelines for Self-Evaluation", 2019
Standards and Specific Elements	References
1.7 Information management	Part 1 § 1, 3, 3.3 § "Preparation of the instruments (meetings, questionnaires, focus groups...)" § "Preparation of the SER" § "Contents of the SER" "2. SWOT Analysis and updating of the Strategic Plan" § "Contents of the SER" "9. Ability to create networks" {VG} § "Contents of the SER" "11. Policies for internationalization" § Annexes to the SER: 1 - Faculty organigram; 2 - Numbers of teaching staff; 3 - Mean age of teaching staff; 4 - Mean hours of teaching per week; 5 - Numbers of students; 6 - Number of newly enrolled students; 7 - Number of graduate students; 8 - Mean number of years to graduation; 9 - Percentage of student withdrawal; 10 - Scientific production - Number of publications/contributions to conferences by teaching staff; 11 - Economic/financial source
1.8 The publication of information	Part 1 § 1. § "Contents of the SER" "12. Publicity and information management"
1.9 Ongoing monitoring and periodical review of programmes	Part 1 § 1 and 3.2 § "Contents of the SER" "4. General overview regarding programs: education, multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches" § "Contents of the SER" "7. Learning and teaching: definition of study plans, their monitoring and review, appreciation of teaching staff"
1.10 Cyclical external Quality Assurance	§ "Summary and value of the Process" Part 3 § 8. § "Contents of the SER" "3. Quality Assurance/QA policies" § "SER and strategic planning"

Table 2 Relations between the ESG (2015) and the AVEPRO's Guidelines for Self-Evaluation (2019)

The set of Guidelines for Quality Assurance, hereinafter referred to as "the Guidelines" offer ecclesiastical academic institutions in Europe and beyond a unified and practical framework for implementing internal QA. The Guidelines, consistent with the ESG 2015 principles, encourage institutions to develop a formal, public, and stakeholder-inclusive management strategy.

By actively engaging with institutions and integrating their feedback, AVEPRO ensures that its Guidelines remain both practical and adaptable, supporting the development of robust quality assurance mechanisms that are responsive to institutional needs. According to its Statute, AVEPRO regularly forwards a concise report of its activities to the Secretariat of State (in charge of the Holy See's international relations) and to the Dicastery for Culture and Education (DCE). This happens on a yearly basis, by March 31st every year. These Institutions return their feedbacks in the form of suggestions, annotations and informal comments, by virtue of the synergies and collaborative processes existing among the Holy See's Institutions.

The system proposed by AVEPRO is built on a coherent quality policy, recognising that institutions bear primary responsibility for developing their internal quality. With the active participation of students and other internal stakeholders, institutions are tasked with evaluating all aspects of their operations, including study programmes, research activities, innovation, management, funding systems, and services. Their QA procedures must aim to enhance academic and organisational quality, foster a quality culture, minimise bureaucracy, ensure cost-effectiveness, and avoid excessive regulation. In this context, external evaluation procedures focus on verifying, through site visits and the analysis of self-assessment reports, the robustness and effectiveness of these internal processes. The

requirement for institutions to undertake a self-evaluation process serves as an opportunity to embed a culture of continuous quality monitoring and enhancement.

Since the ENQA progress visit in 2022, seventeen European ecclesiastical higher education institutions¹⁰ have successfully undergone external evaluations, and three are currently in the process of implementing it (update: January 2025), reflecting their strong commitment to embracing quality assurance principles. This scenario highlights their dedication to fostering a culture of accountability and excellence within their academic and organisational practices. Their willingness to adopt and implement recommendations underscores the HEIs' proactive approach toward achieving further enhancements and driving continuous improvement in line with international standards and best practices. Furthermore, as stated in the Agency's Strategic Plan 2021-2025, and in a manner that is both complementary to and consistent with ESG 2.6 "Reporting", the Board of Directors and the Scientific Council have established several Working Groups (WGs) to explore specific aspects of quality and quality assurance within the context of ecclesiastical higher education. These Working Groups have delivered position papers and conducted in-depth analyses.

In particular, WG 2, titled "Reports and Training of Experts" has been addressing the quality and effectiveness of self-evaluation and external evaluation reports produced during the cyclical evaluation process. The group has identified a need to harmonise the quality of these reports and has recommended measures to support writers – both from institutions and evaluation panels – in developing more analytical and purpose-driven documents. These findings were subsequently presented to and accepted by the Board of Directors.

The 2020 ENQA review of AVEPRO also highlighted the importance of improving reporting practices. It recommended AVEPRO to take steps to enhance the clarity and comprehensibility of its reports, ensuring they adhere consistently to the provided templates. Additionally, the review emphasised the need to make the reflection of ESG Part 1 more visible in evaluation reports. In response to these recommendations, the Guidelines for Self-Evaluation are being revised with the aim of providing clearer and more detailed guidance to HE institutions. This revision includes specific instructions and practical advice for conducting the self-evaluation process and preparing the Self-Evaluation Report (SER). The overall approach encourages institutions to address standards comprehensively, covering key areas such as institutional context, academic and non-academic domains, human, and financial resources. WG2, working remotely via Zoom, has produced several drafts of the Guidelines, reorganising the content to make it more accessible and easier to apply across various academic contexts. This process reflects AVEPRO's commitment to continuous improvement and alignment with international best practices in quality assurance, including ENQA's Guidelines.

Next Steps

During 2025 and 2026 AVEPRO will continue to review its guidelines and adapt them to different regional contexts. The following table describes the relationship between the ESG and the recently elaborated version of AVEPRO's Guidelines for Self-Evaluation which will be tested in the coming months:

¹⁰ In detail: 7 Ecclesiastical HEIs from France, 6 from Italy, 2 from Poland, 1 from Austria and 1 from Germany. For further information: <https://www.avepro.va/evaluation-reports/?lang=en>

ESG 2015, Part 1										
2025 revised AVEPRO's "Guidelines for Self-Evaluation"	1.1. Policy for quality assurance	1.2. Design and approval of programmes	1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and graduation	1.5. Teaching staff	1.6. Learning resources and student support	1.7. Information management	1.8. Public information	1.9. Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes	1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance
1. The institution's vision, mission, values and positioning <i>The Institution should have a clear vision of its mission and values, from both academic and ecclesiastical viewpoints, as well as its positioning in the academic and ecclesiastical landscape.</i>										
2. Strategic management, organization and governance <i>The Institution should have policies, methods of governance and strategic management, as well as clearly identified structures that support the realization of its mission and its long-term sustainability.</i>										
3. Policy for quality assurance, information management and quality <i>The Institution should have a public QA policy that constitutes an integral part of its operational functioning and strategic management. Teaching and administrative staff as well as students should develop and implement this policy via appropriate structures and processes, also involving external stakeholders. To support well-informed decision-making, the Institution should develop effective processes to collect and analyse information about all activities that feed into the internal quality</i>										
4. Design and approval of programmes within the evolving academic programme profile <i>The Institution should have a realistic and well-conceived overall five-year programme profile, in which individual courses may be developed systematically. This should be a profile which describes the three study cycles and various forms/graduations of multidisciplinary study, and secures the long-term sustainability of the Institution.</i>										
5. Teaching and learning and the student learning experience <i>The Institution should have a clear policy and publicly available data on the nature and characteristics of its philosophy of how students will be facilitated to learn, not only their chosen subject, but also in relation to holistic (integral) person development, and the acquisition of generic transferable skills and competences, and how this learning philosophy will be realised in practice.</i>										
6. Research and scholarship <i>The Institution should have a clear, explicit and agreed vision and accompanying support mechanisms regarding the role, scope and significance of its research, and its research positioning, intensity and volume.</i>										
7. Third mission and social responsibility <i>The Institution should foster and promote forms of commitment and contact with external ecclesiastical and societal entities in order to render its own activity more fruitful and extend its impact beyond the strictly academic environment (of education and research), thus contributing to the religious, social and cultural development of the church, the society, and territory in which it is based.</i>										
8. Institutional positioning and overall partnership strategy <i>The Institution should have and pursue an explicit strategic policy regarding the alliances and partnerships it develops both with other institutions and collaborating societal partners, consistent with its mission, traditions, scope, profile and circumstances. Such partnerships may be local, national or international in nature.</i>										
9. Human resources and the institutional quality <i>The Institution should have a clear set of policies and practices in the field of HR to serve institutional objectives and to ensure that there is a continuing renewal of staff capabilities and expertise appropriate to the fulfilment of its academic activities and delivery of its educational profile.</i>										
10. Non academic support and services for student <i>The Institution should have adequate resources and services available to students (e.g. advising in civil questions, recognition right, housing, personal counselling, health and care, etc.).</i>										
11. Financial sources and sustainability <i>The institution should have appropriate funding for all its activities, monitor its budget and secure its sustainability.</i>										
12. Public information <i>The Institution should publish clear, accessible, up-to-date and objective information about its activities.</i>										
Overview of consideration of IQA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 3 Mapping AVEPRO's 2025 revised Guidelines, ESG Part 1¹¹

¹¹ The Points 7 and 8 are specific from the *Veritatis gaudium*

In 2027, following the approval of the new ESG, the Agency will initiate a review process specific to Europe. As the new ESG will plausibly allow for a period of adjustment, the Agency will use this time to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the changes introduced and their implications for the AVEPRO's Guidelines. The Agency will engage its key stakeholders, namely the Scientific Council and the relevant Working Groups, to assess the necessary adaptations and develop an implementation plan aimed at incorporating the updates into its Guidelines, while maintaining coherence with international standards and regional needs.

These activities should be considered within the context of strategic priorities (see Section 3.5 of this report):

- 1 “Foster a culture of Quality”
- 2 “Adapt methodology also to the specific needs of non European ecclesiastical HEIs”

Key documents/ Evidence

- [AVEPRO Guidelines: Nature, context, purpose, standards and procedures of quality evaluation and promotion](#)
- [AVEPRO Guidelines for Self-Evaluation](#)
- AVEPRO Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance (Draft 2025 – Hard copy)
- Condette, Marine (2024): “[Lex imperfecta , governance and persuasion: the case of quality assurance in Roman Catholic ecclesiastical higher education.](#)” Quality in Higher Education. 30. 1-17. 10.1080/13538322.2023.2294907

2.2 ESG 2.6 "Reporting"

The ESG definition

STANDARD:

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

The ENQA Panel recommendations

AVEPRO should take steps to further improve comprehensibility of its reports that clearly follow the template it provides. AVEPRO should take steps to assure a stronger visibility of the reflection of ESG part one in its evaluation reports.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

The timeline

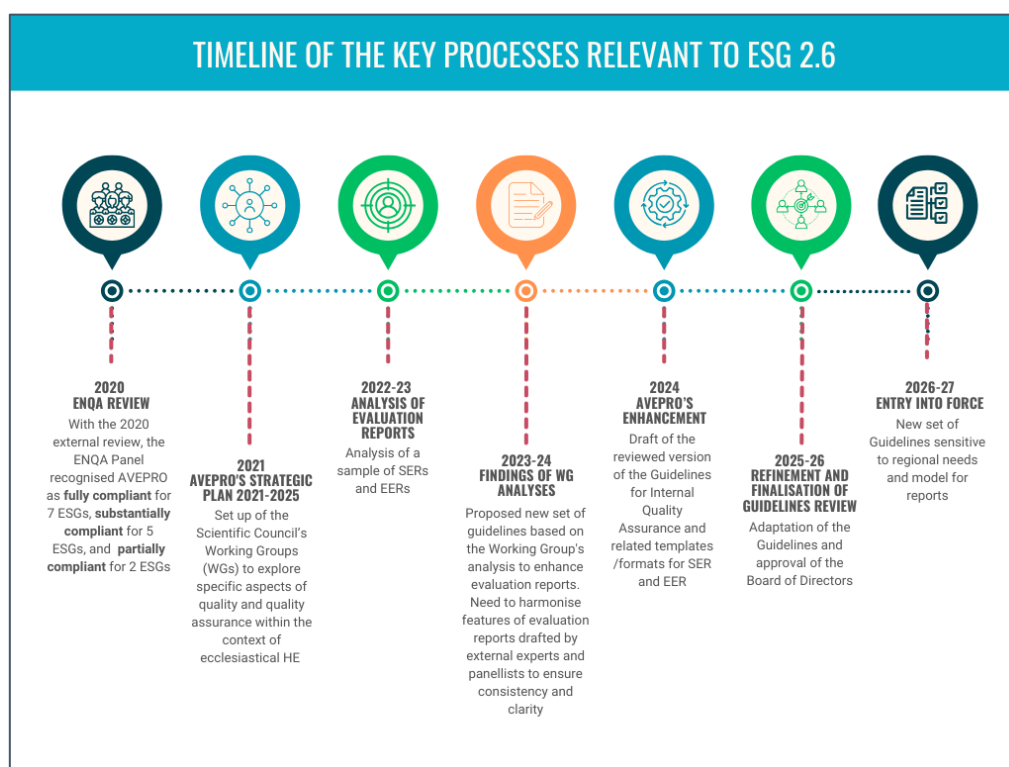


Figure 5 The Timeline of the Key Steps and Processes Relevant to ESG 2.6

AVEPRO's follow-up and critical reflection

AVEPRO is aware of the importance of further enhancing the comprehensibility of its reports, particularly in ensuring they adhere clearly to the template provided. The Agency is fully aware of this need and has already taken significant steps (as presented in points 1 and 2 below) towards improving the clarity and consistency of its evaluation reports.

At the same time, it remains committed to upholding the principles of flexibility and contextualisation, recognising the diversity of the higher education institutions it evaluates. These principles ensure that

the reports are tailored appropriately to each institution's unique characteristics, while maintaining a clear and structured approach in line with the Agency's guidelines and shared templates.

To improve the quality and clarity of these reports, the Agency has been realising the following actions:

1. **Establishment of Working Group 2 (WG 2)** within the Scientific Council, focusing on “Reports and Training of Experts”.
2. **Development of the Agency's Training Strategy and Framework** and **provision of training for experts**, and development of tools aimed at enhancing the clarity and quality of reports.

The External Evaluation Reports (EERs) are the most visible results of the evaluation process, as they are published on the AVEPRO website. These reports play a key role in institutional enhancement, offering recommendations for improvement. The Evaluation Commission is required to write reports in a clear, accessible style, considering that they are intended for both experts and non-expert audiences. To guide the commissions, AVEPRO provides a report template and specifies key elements to be included, ensuring consistency and clarity.

WG 2's focus is on improving the quality of these reports, starting with the Self-Evaluation Reports (SERs), which heavily influence the quality of the final EERs. The WG has been reviewing reports across various languages and has made key findings, including the need for enhanced expert training, training for academic institutions, and the strong link between SER quality and the EER quality.

Considering that the AVEPRO methodology allows Ecclesiastical faculties to use the language of the country in which they operate when drafting the SER, the Agency, together with its Board of Directors and its Scientific council, will define processes aimed at evaluating the quality of internal evaluation reports.

In response to these findings, WG 2 is developing the AVEPRO's **Training Strategy and Framework** that outlines the competencies required for the members of the External Evaluation Teams, including attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed to produce insightful, systematic, and actionable EERs. This strategy will also include a multiyear schedule for training activities, focusing on senior staff within institutions to foster a better understanding of improved processes and international best practices. Therefore, AVEPRO's training strategy will impact not only on evaluation but also on the promotion of Quality.

The overall operating philosophy and approach will be:

- Problem- or issue-centered.
- Action-focused in terms of translating learning back to the organisation.
- Collaborative: faculty and participants working together on issues and exchanging good practice.
- Comparative: utilising international experience in the understanding and analysis of issues and their solution, suitably adapted to different settings and realities.

The themes to be included in the training strategy, extending beyond the evaluation process *strictu sensu*, could include, for example:

- The conduct of Institutional reviews: priorities for external effectiveness.
- Preparing for and succeeding at institutional reviews (eg for senior institutional staff).
- Research strategy.
- Third mission strategy.
- Internationalisation and partnerships.

The target groups will vary according to topic, but will likely include rectors, deans and heads of academic units, directors of quality offices, experts to be engaged in evaluation commissions. The strategy will be implemented both with residential workshops and webinar or online delivery.

Furthermore, in response to a recommendation regarding the **visibility** of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in evaluation reports, AVEPRO is committed to balancing ESG relevance with cultural sensitivity¹². AVEPRO's guidelines are fully aligned with the ESG standards, but also address areas beyond ESG coverage, such as research, governance, and sustainability. To ensure the guidelines reflect both a unified methodology and cultural sensitivity, AVEPRO is currently finalising the updating of its guidelines, with input from Working Group 1 (WG 1) focused on the relationship between the quality of internal evaluation reports and those prepared by the commissions that visited the faculties and ecclesiastical universities. AVEPRO has also:

- signed agreements with five European QA agencies (namely: AQ Austria, AAQ Switzerland, ANVUR Italy, PKA Poland, and NAKVIS Slovenia) focusing on collaboration, the exchange of experts, mutual learning events, and joint evaluations;
- conducted joint evaluations with two of them (AQ Austria and AAQ Switzerland).

Through a mapping exercise comparing AVEPRO's guidelines with those of the Swiss agency, it has been shown that the agencies share a common foundation under the ESG framework.

In terms of procedural transparency, AVEPRO ensures that final evaluation reports are published on its website within 10 weeks of the evaluation visit. These reports are also delivered to relevant academic authorities, including the Dicastery for Culture and Education and the Grand Chancellor of the evaluated Institution. While AVEPRO accepts reports written in any of the seven official languages of the Holy See, English and/or Italian are preferred for consistency and accessibility.

Next Steps

During 2025 and 2026 AVEPRO will:

- define an ad hoc training strategy for evaluators and Institutions,
- continue to review its guidelines and templates,
- organise a mechanism of improvement for SERs.

These activities should be considered within the context of strategic priorities (see § 3.5 of this report):

- 3 “Enhancing organisational capacity and expertise”.
- 4 “Strengthen collaboration with relevant stakeholders”.

Key documents/ Evidence

- [AVEPRO Guidelines for External-Evaluation](#)
- [Set up of the Working Groups of the Scientific Council](#)
- [Reporting and training of experts](#) (Output of the WG 2)
- AVEPRO website ([External evaluation Reports page](#))

¹² This is especially important for institutions outside Europe, where AVEPRO aims to avoid the perception of cultural neo-colonialism.

2.3 ESG 3.5 "Resources"

The ESG definition

STANDARD:

Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

The ENQA Panel recommendations

AVEPRO should define a work plan and connect required resources to it in order to balance and plan activities and required resources. This will help to specify the realistic need of additionally required resources. AVEPRO should better use the potential of the Scientific Council, define a meeting interval and adhere to it.

Panel suggestion for further improvement: The panel advises AVEPRO to assess its current governance and organisational structure (e.g. two boards with potentially overlapping duties) in order to make even better use of the expert knowledge the agency can draw upon.

Panel conclusion: partially compliant

ENQA Board Letter 22 June 2020: Regarding the standard 3.5 Resources, the Board notes a significant increase of the agency's resources since the last review. The agency's resources suffice for its current functioning, thus, in the opinion of the Board, the standard can be considered as substantially compliant with the ESG. Nevertheless, the Board shares the panel's concern on better use of the existing resources and calls for a careful consideration of the agency's future workload.

The timeline

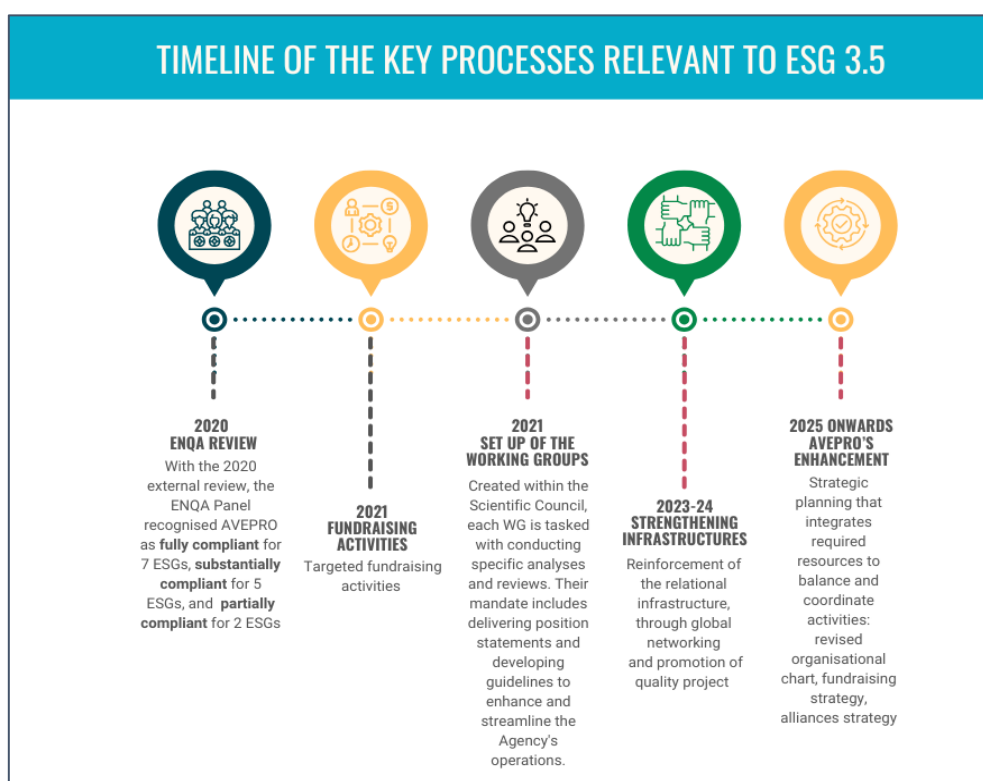


Figure 6 The Timeline of the Key Steps and Processes Relevant to ESG 3.5

AVEPRO's follow-up and critical reflection

The issue of the resources available to AVEPRO has been considered critically and carefully by the panels appointed by ENQA since the first review (2013).

The Agency has always been recognised for its transparent and open approach to resource management, as well as its continuous pursuit of innovative and occasionally creative ways to optimise the resources available.

Four categories of resources can be considered:

1. Human resources.
2. Financial resources.
3. Material resources (e.g. spaces and other infrastructures).
4. Intangible resources.

Regarding the first category, AVEPRO consistently stated in its self-assessment reports that the staff available to the Agency was insufficient to ensure and support all the activities and responsibilities assigned to it. Over the years, successive Agency leaderships engaged in contacts and discussions with the Holy See's human resources office on multiple occasions. In 2024, the Agency's request to recruit a new employee was approved, and a job profile was promptly drafted to initiate the selection of the most suitable candidate.

Human resources

There is an awareness that AVEPRO would need additional **human resources**; however, there is also an understanding of the Holy See's personnel policies, as nearly all Dicasteries face understaffing. This situation is further influenced by factors such as the global economic and financial crisis, exacerbated by the pandemic. Consequently, it can be argued that AVEPRO is almost against the trend as far as the overall situation in the Holy See is concerned. Furthermore, looking at the higher education system globally, the economic crisis and the pandemic have led to both mergers of academic institutions and the redefinition of the roles and responsibilities assigned to various Quality Assurance Agencies. Over the past five years, sustainability has become a key issue on the agendas of most universities and the broader higher education system.

In light of these considerations, it is important to highlight that, regarding the staff of the Agency's Secretariat, AVEPRO benefits from the expertise and contributions of its Scientific Council and Board of Directors, as well as the collaboration of more than 300 experts involved in evaluations. These resources are extremely valuable for the functioning of the Agency and have not led to increased expenditure in financial terms. Moreover, as both the panel and the ENQA Board suggested in their 2020 letter, AVEPRO has further rationalised the benefits of the expertise of the Scientific Council members in particular. Already in the pre-pandemic era three *Working Groups* (WGs) were set up within the Scientific Council; the WGs' mandate focuses on carrying out specific analyses and reviews, and delivering *position statements* and *guidelines* as usable documents that aim to facilitate and improve the Agency's work.

Financial resources

The second category of resources that this analysis intends to address is **financial resources**. In this context, AVEPRO can consider itself in an overall satisfactory position. Over the past five years, every budget submitted to the Secretariat for the Economy has been approved without changes or reductions, and in addition, targeted fundraising activities have resulted in a donation from an international foundation that has been partly used to start the 'quality promotion' process in the Americas and Africa in 2024. The same donation will also be used for the same purposes in Asia and

Europe over the next few years. It is worth noting here that these activities were partially co-financed by local academic institutions that contributed to the organisation and implementation of the events. AVEPRO is aware that in the future it will be increasingly necessary to seek external funding for the realisation of activities and projects. Despite these pressures, the Agency intends to continue with the policy of 'gratuitousness' that characterises AVEPRO's work. To date, no fee has ever been charged to the academic institutions evaluated and the experts involved have acted without receiving material compensation. This should therefore be taken into account when analysing the position and sustainability of the organisational model adopted by AVEPRO.

Material resources, such as spaces and infrastructures

An open issue that has caused the Agency some unease concerns the **available spaces and infrastructures**. The AVEPRO office has remained in the same building since 2008, i.e. a few months after its foundation. However, an overall reorganisation of office space, coupled with a request from the Dicastery responsible for organising the Jubilee of 2025, has resulted in AVEPRO's relocation to premises on the second floor of the same building, Via della Conciliazione 5. Currently, the available space does not fully meet the Agency's needs, and the Agency has had to rely on different venues and facilities provided by other Holy See bodies to organise meetings. However, redefining the available space appears to be a priority for 2025, both in anticipation of the recruitment of a new member of the Agency's staff and in order to guarantee the possibility of welcoming guests and delegations who frequently come to Rome and take the opportunity to organise a meeting with AVEPRO as well.

Regarding the technological infrastructure available at the Agency's head office, it is worth noting that the usage of technology increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Agency's emergency procedure allowed for evaluations to be conducted even if the appointed Panel was not physically present on site.

Intangible resources

Intangible resources are another key typology of resources for AVEPRO, playing a crucial role in the execution of activities that are essential to the Agency. While some of these resources, such as reputational capital, are common across all Vatican institutions, others (such as networking, formative approach, and organisational creativity) are unique to AVEPRO and are integral to its distinctive identity and operational approach.

Reputational resources provide institutions with special credibility, built over time through a history of successful outcomes. One of AVEPRO's most valuable reputational assets is the trust and recognition it has earned within the academic and ecclesial communities. This is exemplified by the commitment of external experts who willingly offer their expertise as evaluators without expecting financial compensation. Their motivation stems from a deep respect for AVEPRO's mission and a shared sense of service to the Church. Such voluntary participation not only underscores the credibility and esteem AVEPRO holds but also enriches the evaluators themselves, fostering a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and experience.

This dedication strengthens the Agency's work, reinforcing its role as a key player in promoting quality assurance in Catholic higher education worldwide.

Dear Dottore Cinquegrani,

Thanks for your email and clarification. I am not expecting any remuneration for my participation in the panel of evaluators of the Faculty of Theology at the University of [....]

I accepted out of respect for AVEPRO and service to the Church.

Apart from my sense of gratitude to the Church, I am sure that event will be an enriching academic experience to me.

Figure 7 Excerpt from a message sent to AVEPRO's Director by a candidate expert on January 23, 2025

This credibility acts as a valuable form of "credit," but it must be continually nurtured. While it takes years to establish solid trust, it can be lost in a matter of months, or even less in some areas. The Flagship Universities model heavily relies on the strategic use of these reputational resources. AVEPRO has worked to foster a collaborative and supportive environment, not only with academic institutions but also by investing in personal relationships. This approach emphasises the importance of building lasting connections and maintaining the trust earned over time.

However, the key intangible resources that define AVEPRO are:

- *Networking skills.* The Agency can in fact outsource a number of activities thanks to the network it has created over the years using both resources and structures belonging to ecclesiastical academic institutions and those traceable to the various Dicasteries of the Holy See. By way of example, in the recent Seminars organised in the Americas and Africa, the support received not only from the three Universities that hosted the events (The Catholic University of America in Washington, Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá and the Catholic University of the Congo in Kinshasa) but also the support received from the Nunciatures (the Holy See's embassies in the various countries) and the local Episcopal Conferences was significant.

The same principle has been adopted with several Agencies active in the field of Quality assurance in Europe (all full members of ENQA) with which AVEPRO has established bilateral agreements aimed not only at carrying out joint evaluation visits but also at exchanging experts, expertise and good practices. Lastly, again thanks to this 'policy of alliances', the cooperation agreement with IFCU (International Federation of Catholic Universities) makes it possible to constantly expand the database of potential experts, and a possibility of collaboration in the field of training both experts and leaders of academic institutions is being studied in order to raise their awareness of the growing relevance of quality culture.

- *Formative approach.* AVEPRO operates as a formative evaluation agency rather than an accreditation body. Its methodology avoids reward or punishment mechanisms, focusing instead on fostering continuous quality improvement within academic institutions. Beyond its direct impact on institutions, the Agency's approach also promotes the dissemination of its guiding principles throughout society. Three core principles underpin AVEPRO's approach: gratuity, persuasion, and critical reflection. *Gratuity* reflects the Agency's deliberate choice to exclude market-driven and competitive dynamics from the evaluation process. This approach minimises risks of conflicts of interest, while prioritising learning opportunities for all participants, including experts.

Persuasion operates on two levels. First, it focuses on AVEPRO's capacity to demonstrate the benefits of its methodology to academic institutions. Second, it emphasises the institutions' role in internalising the committee's recommendations and translating them into strategic goals. This process shifts evaluation away from a merely bureaucratic framework, encouraging institutions to take full ownership of their development. *Critical reflection* is the foundation that binds the entire

process. Rather than delivering judgments, AVEPRO offers an impartial, constructive external perspective. This enables academic institutions to refine their strategies and align future directions with their mission and values.

- *Organisational creativity.* Being a small institution certainly brings disadvantages, but at the same time it guarantees flexibility, speed and a problem-solving approach. The secretariat staff is highly dedicated, informal in its relations, and oriented towards mutual support. This is realised through a flexible, sometimes interchangeable organisation in which one must be able to cover (as far as possible) several roles. The service logic that characterises AVEPRO's work allows for a relationship between 'peers' with academic institutions and experts also because there is a shared vision between the Agency and the institutions.

Next Steps

2025 -26 AVEPRO will:

- develop a fundraising strategy,
- redefine the organisational chart of the Agency,
- set up alliances in order to accomplish its mission.

Consistent with the above mentioned four categories (Human, Financial, Material and Intangible), AVEPRO, in order to increase the financial resources available, has contacted some foundations to present the activities and projects for which support is requested. In the near future (end of 2025 and 2026) the Agency will define a fundraising policy by developing a set of specific proposals to be submitted to potential donors.

With regard to the strengthening of human resources, the Agency has launched a search for one staff member to be hired on a full-time, permanent contract starting in 2026. The selection process is already well advanced and should be completed by the late autumn of 2025. This process also includes a redefinition of the material resources (especially office space) available to AVEPRO.

With the appointment of a new staff member already underway and the process well on track, it is also important to highlight other key elements outlined in the Agency's Annual Operating Plan 2025, including:

- The utilisation of the Working Groups within the Steering Committee to enhance informed capacity and expertise through a structured assembly process.
- The appointment of external experts on an ongoing basis, with specific responsibilities assigned by the Director in key areas of activity.

Finally, the way in which the Agency intends to strengthen its intangible resources is through collaboration and alliances possible thanks to the network of contacts that AVEPRO has developed over the years. Examples include collaboration with the IFCU, local Episcopal Conferences and Universities. In the first case the focus is on the exchange of information, databases, names of experts, content and research. In the second case, Bishops and Higher Education Institutions have offered organisational and financial support for regional Seminars realised in different continents, including Europe (e.g., Seminar with French Universities and Faculties, to be held in Paris in May 2025).

These activities should be considered within the context of strategic priorities (see Section 3.5):

- 3 "Enhancing organisational capacity and expertise".
- 4 "Strengthen collaboration with relevant stakeholders".

Key documents/ Evidence

- [AVEPRO Strategic Plan 2021-2025](#)
- [Annual Operating Plan 2025](#)
- AVEPRO, [Annual reports 2022-2024](#)
- [Agreement AVEPRO – AAQ Switzerland](#)

2.4 Selected enhancement area: ESG 2.3 'Implementing processes'

The ESG definition

STANDARD:

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

The ENQA Panel recommendations

AVEPRO should implement a consistent follow-up procedure.

The timeline

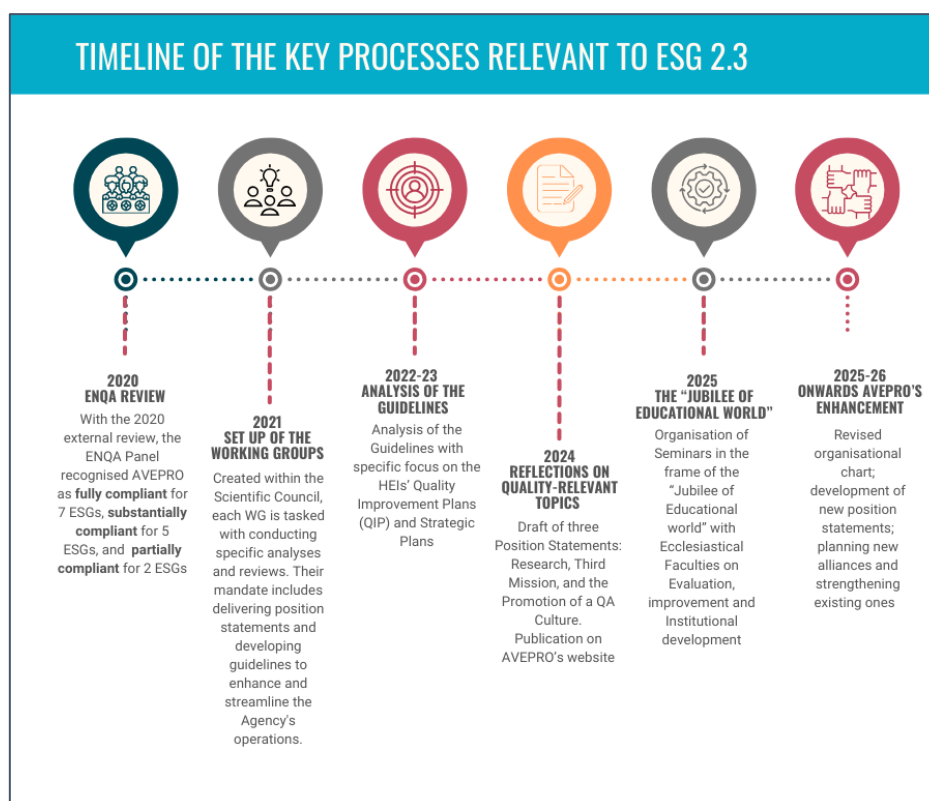


Figure 8 Timeline of the Key Processes relevant to ESG 2.3

AVEPRO's follow-up and critical reflection

AVEPRO chose to analyse this standard for two reasons. First of all, the ENQA panel in its previous evaluation had rated it as 'substantially compliant', thus suggesting that there was room for improvement; furthermore, the follow-up is a specific feature of the methodology proposed by the Agency.

In response to the 2020 recommendation, AVEPRO established three guiding principles:

- A. Follow-up concludes one evaluation cycle and steers towards the next one.
- B. Follow-up is not only the 'bridge' between two successive evaluation cycles, but also links the two 'pillars' of AVEPRO's activity, i.e. evaluation and quality promotion.
- C. The follow-up process also allows the Agency to improve and refine the methodology and tools it uses.

A. Follow-up concludes one evaluation cycle and steers towards the next one

The first point concerns the link that the Agency suggests between the recommendations of the external evaluation report, the definition of a quality improvement plan and the subsequent drafting (or modification if already existing) of the HEI's Strategic Plan. This document will influence/determine the activity of the Faculty or University in the following years. The implementation of the Strategic Plan will be one of the themes of the analysis that the Institution will address when preparing the self-evaluation report of the next cycle.

AVEPRO has acknowledged the importance of the panel's recommendations and has undertaken a comprehensive process to enhance its evaluation processes and procedures, involving the Scientific Council (and its WGs) and the Board of Directors.

The Agency emphasises that quality evaluation is a cyclical and ongoing process designed to foster continuous improvement within academic institutions. This approach ensures that institutions remain committed to successive evaluation cycles, engaging in reflective and progressive practices. This enhanced methodology establishes a cohesive framework that connects each phase of the evaluation process to the next, enabling a seamless transition between cycles and allowing institutions to effectively build on earlier recommendations and accomplishments.

In alignment with global best practices (among others: ENQA, EUA, INQAAHE), AVEPRO's evaluation model includes a follow-up process after the external evaluation phase. This follow-up process to be undertaken by the institution is designed to achieve the following key objectives:

1. To assess the feasibility and appropriateness of the recommendations made by the AVEPRO-appointed team and presented in the External Evaluation Report.
2. To foster collective reflection that leads to the implementation of a Strategic Plan.
3. To monitor the implementation of the strategic plan and update the institution's SWOT analysis, which then initiates a new evaluation cycle and the production of a new Self-Evaluation Report (SER).

To support these objectives, AVEPRO offers two 'tools' to the academic institutions undergoing review:

- The Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) deriving from the HEI's SWOT analysis.
- The Guidelines for Institutional Strategic Plan.

In other words, the approach proposed by AVEPRO is consistent with ESG standard 1.10, where is stated: "Quality assurance is a continuous process that does not end with the external feedback or report or its follow-up process within the institution. Therefore, institutions ensure that the progress

made since the last external quality assurance activity is taken into consideration when preparing for the next one”.

B. The follow-up is not only the 'bridge' between two successive evaluation cycles, but also links the two 'pillars' of AVEPRO's activity, i.e. evaluation and quality promotion

This structured approach, outlined in AVEPRO's guidelines, serves two primary purposes:

- The relationship between academic institutions' evaluation and strategic planning reinforces AVEPRO's formative, developmental, and incremental evaluation model.
- The “promotion” of quality links these processes, maximizing opportunities for fostering cooperation and strengthening a culture of quality within academic institutions.

AVEPRO's quality promotion is based on two pillars: the production of documents to be offered to the institutions and the evaluation panels (the Position Statements) and the realisation of *ad hoc* seminars. Due to the global mission of the agency in 2025 three seminars were held outside Europe, but in 2026 and 2027 two meetings will be organised for the Faculties and Ecclesiastical Universities on our continent aimed at both quality promotion and delivering a sort of meta-evaluation of the experiences realised in Europe to date.

In order to support the promotion of quality, AVEPRO decided to produce, in addition to the Guidelines (to whose contents academic institutions must adhere), another type of document, the Position Statements, the purpose of which is to offer institutions and evaluation panels food for thought and insights.

In detail, the Position Statements include reflections on quality-relevant topics that were made available to both institutions and evaluation committees through publication on the Agency's website. These documents serve as models of internationally recognised good practice, supporting the development of strategy and quality assurance practices, as well as providing valuable sources of advice. It is worth highlighting those that have already been produced by WG1, such as Research, Third Mission, and the Promotion of a QA Culture, alongside those planned for WG1 to complete in 2025, which include mergers, partnerships and alliances, sustainability, research degrees. In summary, the position statements are primarily aimed at fulfilling the function of "promoting quality", while the guidelines focus on the evaluation aspect.

C. The follow-up process also allows the Agency to improve and refine the methodology and tools it uses

AVEPRO uses the follow-up to update and improve its methodology and the tools the Agency offers to Faculties and Ecclesiastical Universities. In this perspective, not only the institutions but also the Agency will benefit from the follow-up process.

This awareness was mainly achieved thanks to the efforts of the working groups of the Scientific Council.

WG 2 has focused on the relationship between the quality of internal evaluation reports and those prepared by the commissions that visited the faculties and ecclesiastical universities. One of the most significant outcomes was demonstrating the correlation between the two: a well-structured self-evaluation report generally corresponds to a clear and comprehensive external evaluation report, featuring a substantial level of critical analysis and providing specific, actionable recommendations.

However, in several cases, it was noted that a poorly structured or almost exclusively descriptive self-evaluation report did not enable the committee to draw up a good external evaluation report. WG2 will produce a revised Guideline for the External Evaluation Report in 2025 to ensure compatibility with the new SER Guidelines.

Working Group 3 (WG 3) has developed a series of position statements on the relationship between the *Magisterium* of Pope Francis and quality in academia. The work progressed step by step, beginning with the analysis of certain Encyclicals and Apostolic Constitutions, and culminating in the development of a position statement that presents specific suggestions of a practical and normative nature aimed at supporting the ecclesiastical faculties in the implementation of the design proposed in the Foreword of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium*. This text was shared with, among others, the Dicastery for Culture and Education, which, as part of its activities, organised a conference in December 2024 on the 'Future of Theology'. During the conference, themes emerged that were also highlighted in the document proposed by AVEPRO.

To ensure the effectiveness and consistency of this process, in AVEPRO discussions are underway to refine the follow-up methodology, such as introducing a 'follow-up report' from institutions two years after the site visit, inspired by the ENQA methodology (extending in this case the evaluation interval between two cycles from 5 to 7 years).

AVEPRO is aware of potential challenges, such as 'review fatigue' and diminishing returns from evaluations in mature academic institutions. As such, the follow-up process is to be designed so as to be flexible and not overly burdensome. A further methodological innovation could be the use of the Strategic Plan and a report on its implementation as a mode of 'self-evaluation report', e.g. in institutions that have already implemented 2 or 3 complete cycles. In summary, strengthening the follow-up processes should lead to a lightening of the evaluation mechanisms in order to avoid a counter-effect with regard to the improvement processes needed by the institutions.

Next Steps

2025 -26 AVEPRO will:

- deliver new position statements,
- redefine the organisational chart of the Agency,
- set up alliances in order to accomplish its mission.

These activities should be considered within the context of strategic priorities (see section 3.5 of this report):

- 3 “Enhancing organisational capacity and expertise”
- 4 “Strengthen collaboration with relevant stakeholders”

Key documents/ Evidence

- AVEPRO [Web site](#)
- [AVEPRO Guidelines on Strategic Planning](#)
- Marine Condette(2024): “[It’s paradoxical, but it works’ – Towards ambidexterity in external quality assurance: the case of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical higher education](#). Studies in Higher Education. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2407516>

3. AVEPRO SWOT ANALYSIS AND THE EMERGING PRIORITIES FOR ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT

This SWOT analysis was conducted through a participatory process involving members of AVEPRO's Scientific Committee and Board of Directors. The diverse expertise and insights of key stakeholders were collected in an inclusive and collaborative way, ensuring a comprehensive and well-rounded assessment of AVEPRO's strategic position. Through interactive discussion and collective reflection, participants contributed their perspectives, enabling a nuanced understanding of AVEPRO's operating environment, institutional impact and future potential. The findings will serve as a basis for strategic planning, helping to align AVEPRO's mission with the evolving challenges and opportunities in the field of quality assurance in higher education.

The table below presents the key elements (or titles) related to Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, which will be further expanded and detailed in the following pages:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global reach and international expertise • Promotion of a culture of Quality through collaborative and supportive approach focused on continuous improvement (as in the selected enhancement area: ESG 2.3 'Implementing processes') • Capacity to value human and professional resources • Comprehensive methodology and expertise • Legitimacy and commitment to ecclesiastical mission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource constraints and operational challenges • Governance and communication challenges • Need to strengthen evaluation quality and training (as in the selected enhancement area: ESG 2.3 'Implementing processes') • Need for strengthened follow-up mechanisms and internal Quality Assurance • Criticalities that hinder strategic plan implementation and monitoring
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution to raise awareness about Quality Assurance at global scale • Development of Quality Assurance and global engagement • A values-driven vision of education to influence Ecclesiastical Higher Education and global dialogue • Enhancement of operational effectiveness and expertise (as in the selected enhancement area: ESG 2.3 'Implementing processes') • Strengthening of global influence and collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges in institutional engagement and Quality culture development (as in the selected enhancement area: ESG 2.3 'Implementing processes') • Potential risks to credibility and influence • Threats to AVEPRO's sustainability and influence • Challenges to AVEPRO's mission and impact • External challenges to AVEPRO's effectiveness

Table 4 The Concise Main Elements of the SWOT Analysis

3.1 The Strengths

AVEPRO's strengths lie in several key areas that reflect its unique character and operational excellence:

1. Global reach and international expertise.

- *AVEPRO benefits from a profoundly international outlook, with its Scientific Council and Board of Directors comprising experts from diverse countries and higher education traditions across Europe and beyond. This diversity enriches the Agency's vision and programmes with unique insights and global experience.*
- *Drawing on extensive expertise in evaluating universities and institutes worldwide, AVEPRO incorporates international best practices into its assessments, further strengthened by its effective collaborations with European QA agencies.*
- *The Agency's proactive approach to expanding its external quality assurance activities is demonstrated through seminars in regions such as the Americas, Africa, and upcoming initiatives in Southeast Asia, highlighting its commitment to global engagement and outreach.*

2. Promotion of a culture of quality through collaborative and supportive approach focused on continuous improvement.

- *AVEPRO's methodology includes self-evaluation, external evaluation, the development of a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), and strategic planning. This comprehensive approach fosters systematic monitoring and continuous institutional enhancement.*

3. Capacity to value human and professional resources.

- *AVEPRO benefits from experienced leadership and continuity, with key personnel having served since the Agency's inception, ensuring exceptional institutional knowledge and effective mission execution.*
- *The Agency uses a collaborative, supportive approach in its evaluations, providing clear methodologies and constructive follow-up to help institutions achieve their strategic goals while fostering a collegial and non-adversarial environment.*
- *AVEPRO's highly committed staff demonstrate remarkable competence and dedication, consistently achieving significant outcomes while upholding the Agency's ethos of service to the Church and the global academic community.*
- *The ability to access professional contributions (e.g. the involvement of the Scientific Council and Board of Directors) significantly enhances AVEPRO's expertise and capacity, enabling the Agency to address complex matters while maintaining the highest standards.*

4. Comprehensive methodology and expertise.

- *AVEPRO places a strong emphasis on self-assessment, encouraging institutions to engage in critical reflection through Self-Evaluation Reports (SER). This process fosters honest introspection, identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to support meaningful improvement.*
- *The Agency's methodology is flexible and adaptable, rooted in international standards and tailored to the unique legal, academic, and ecclesiastical contexts of diverse institutions. This ensures the relevance and utility of evaluations, as reflected in its well-structured guidelines and adaptable organisational practices.*
- *AVEPRO provides high-quality guiding documents, such as the Standards and Guidelines for Self-Evaluation and External Evaluation Reports, and position statements on research, Third*

Mission, and training for Quality Assurance Experts. These resources are widely adopted and regularly updated to align with international trends.

- *External evaluations are conducted by carefully selected international experts, ensuring objective, high-quality, and globally informed assessments that bring valuable perspectives to the evaluation process.*

5. Legitimacy and commitment to ecclesiastical mission.

- *AVEPRO's legitimacy is strongly recognised by Ecclesiastical authorities, as noted in the Apostolic Constitutions Veritatis Gaudium and Praedicate Evangelium.*
- *As an agency of the Holy See, AVEPRO has a deep understanding of the identity and mission of ecclesiastical institutions, focusing its evaluations on the formation of Church leaders and the promotion of theological research.*
- *AVEPRO's evaluation framework incorporates the principles of Pope Francis's Magisterium – dialogue, inclusion, and social commitment – ensuring alignment with the Church's broader mission in the contemporary world.*

3.2 The Weaknesses

1. Resource constraints and operational challenges.

- *AVEPRO operates with limited financial resources, which restricts its ability to expand activities and implement desired enhancements.*
- *The Secretariat's small size, limited capacity, and specialist expertise have led to reliance on the Scientific Council, reflecting the dedication of its members but underscoring the need for a more sustainable solution. The Secretariat's stretched resources and workload have resulted in slower implementation of outputs from Working Groups, potentially impacting higher education institutions.*
- *Provided that AVEPRO has produced many high-quality guiding documents in recent months, further efforts are needed to ensure these resources effectively reach their intended audiences, fostering stronger engagement and ownership.*

2. Governance and communication challenges.

- *The role of the Board of Directors and the Scientific Council in overseeing and monitoring the processes of the Strategic Plan needs to be better defined and structured.*
- *Limited interaction among Scientific Council members restricts opportunities for in-depth discussion and collaboration, despite their valuable and diverse international expertise. While virtual communication has improved post-pandemic, it cannot fully replace the benefits of regular in-person meetings.*
- *Infrequent meetings of the Board of Directors hinder its ability to engage consistently with the Agency's activities and provide timely, impactful guidance.*

3. Need to strengthen evaluation quality and training.

- *While evaluation reports provide valuable insights, there is potential to further strengthen their quality by ensuring a balanced focus on evidence analysis, critical engagement, and actionable recommendations that account for the unique contexts of institutions. This approach would enhance cross-institutional comparisons and better reflect the Agency's impact.*

- *Expanding the pool of trained experts presents challenges for effective external evaluations. A standardized training strategy for evaluation panels and institutions is essential to ensuring consistency and excellence in the review process.*
- *The absence of meta-analysis and structured training for evaluators may weaken evaluation quality and effectiveness, impacting alignment with the Agency's goals and standards.*

4. Need for strengthened follow-up mechanisms and internal Quality Assurance.

- *AVEPRO encourages the development of Quality Improvement Plans (QIPs) and Strategic Plans (SPs), but the lack of a robust follow-up framework and procedures limits its ability to assess the implementation and impact of recommendations effectively. Factors such as limited staff capacity, the absence of enforcement mechanisms, and constraints on imposing consequences contribute to this challenge.*
- *Strengthening AVEPRO's internal quality assurance culture and processes, particularly in managing Self-Evaluation Reports (SERs) and External Evaluation Reports (EERs), is key to enhance the overall robustness and effectiveness of its quality assurance activities.*

5. Need to enhance strategic plan implementation and monitoring

- *While the Strategic Plan process is commendable, there is room to strengthen its achievement, monitoring, and periodic readjustment. This is particularly relevant after academic institutions develop their Quality Improvement Plans (QIPs) following external reviews, to ensure effective implementation and alignment with recommendations.*
- *Developing clearer mechanisms for tracking progress and providing structured follow-up support would enhance the impact of the Strategic Plan process, fostering continuous improvement within academic institutions.*

3.3 The Opportunities

1. Contribution to raise awareness about Quality Assurance at global scale

- *The increasing awareness of the importance of internal and external quality assurance among higher education institutions presents an opportunity to further cultivate a robust quality culture.*
- *AVEPRO's flexible methodology, rooted in the European model, can be refined to address the specific needs of diverse regions. By respecting local specificities while maintaining methodological integrity, the Agency ensures its evaluations are relevant, effective, and widely accepted.*
- *The Agency has the potential to promote greater inclusivity among staff and students, leveraging the international character of many institutions to highlight and address these values comprehensively.*
- *AVEPRO's initiatives foster a global collaborative network that connects Church institutions, national and international quality agencies, and higher education experts. This network supports the exchange of best practices, harmonisation of evaluation criteria, and the development of a shared vision for quality in ecclesiastical higher education.*

2. Development of Quality Assurance and global engagement.

- *The increasing awareness of internal and external quality assurance among higher education institutions provides a valuable opportunity to strengthen quality culture and drive continuous improvement.*

- *AVEPRO's flexible methodology, while rooted in the European model, offers the potential to further adapt to the unique cultural and operational contexts of Church institutions worldwide, ensuring evaluations remain effective, relevant, and widely accepted.*
- *With its international reach, AVEPRO is well-positioned to promote inclusivity and diversity among staff and students, leveraging the diverse nature of the institutions it evaluates to address these priorities comprehensively.*
- *AVEPRO's initiatives are creating a global collaborative network that connects Church institutions, quality assurance agencies, and higher education experts. This network fosters the exchange of best practices, aligns evaluation criteria, and cultivates a shared vision for quality in ecclesiastical higher education.*

3. A values-driven vision of education to influence Ecclesiastical Higher Education and global dialogue.

- *AVEPRO offers a distinctive, values-driven vision of education that emphasizes inclusivity and a holistic approach to personal development – what it is called “the integral development of the human person” in the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, encompassing mind, body, and spirit, which can significantly enrich the global higher education landscape.*
- *By providing a platform for deeper engagement, AVEPRO strengthens the Church's dialogue with education and culture across diverse global settings. The integration of culture and education within the Dicastery's structure further supports this mission.*
- *In line with Pope Francis' *Magisterium*, AVEPRO is positioned to offer guidelines and position statements on key policy areas such as research, third mission, inter-religious dialogue, and community development, supporting training and institutional reviews within ecclesiastical higher education.*
- *AVEPRO plays a critical role in helping Higher Education Institutions navigate modern challenges, including competition, sustainability, and the need for realignment with *Veritatis Gaudium*, offering insights on what defines a successful institution in today's dynamic educational environment.*

4. Enhancement of operational effectiveness and expertise.

- *A comprehensive training strategy for external evaluators is being implemented to equip them with the skills needed for critical analysis and the formulation of actionable recommendations, thereby improving the quality of evaluation reports. Additionally, AVEPRO's partnerships with the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) and external funding organisations support the development of internal and external quality assurance staff.*
- *AVEPRO's Scientific Council and Board of Directors are composed of international experts, most of whom actively engage in academic and managerial roles worldwide, bringing valuable global perspectives to the Agency's work and contributing to its strategic direction.*
- *AVEPRO is leveraging technological innovations to enhance its processes, including digital tools for self-evaluation and external evaluation, and virtual training sessions for evaluators, improving efficiency and impact.*

5. Strengthening of global influence and collaboration.

- *AVEPRO's evolving global role emphasizes enhanced cooperation with regional agencies and experts, with expressions of interest from higher education institutions across North and South America, Africa, and Asia, reflecting growing legitimacy and confidence in the Agency.*

- *By engaging in international networks like ENQA, AVEPRO strengthens its position as a hub for dialogue and collaboration, fostering mutual understanding and extending its influence in global higher education. Additionally, AVEPRO is pursuing globally recognised accreditation to complement its existing ENQA membership, further enhancing its international standing.*
- *AVEPRO is expanding its activities to promote knowledge-sharing and the exchange of best practices, demonstrated through initiatives like regional seminars. This broadened focus enables the Agency to address a wider array of topics and contribute to the development of higher education worldwide.*

3.4 The Threats

1. Challenges in institutional engagement and Quality culture development.

- *The implementation of a robust quality system often encounters resistance from institutions, as changes to their culture and practices may be met with reluctance. This resistance can stem from a lack of understanding of the benefits, fear of external criticism, or concerns about the process being perceived as too bureaucratic or intrusive.*
- *There is variability in the development of a quality culture across higher education institutions, with some institutions, especially stand-alone HEIs, demonstrating less awareness and maturity in quality management practices.*
- *A challenge for many institutions, particularly those unaffiliated with larger universities, is the declining number and academic relevance of faculty and students, which can impact the overall quality of education and institutional performance.*

2. Potential risks to credibility and influence.

- *A negative outcome with reference to the confirmation of AVEPRO's full membership in ENQA could undermine its credibility and diminish its impact, potentially affecting its recognition and influence within the global quality assurance landscape.*

3. Threats to AVEPRO's sustainability and influence.

- *AVEPRO faces significant financial vulnerability, limiting its ability to support higher education institutions adequately. Such challenges could hinder the agency's ability to demonstrate its impact, potentially eroding its credibility and fostering suspicions of academic colonialism, particularly among non-Western higher education institutions.*
- *Political and ecclesiastical factors within the Holy See system may influence AVEPRO's actions, affecting its ability to operate effectively.*
- *A potential misunderstanding of AVEPRO's role in the academic world among ecclesiastical higher education institutions could impact the Agency's engagement and collaboration with them.*
- *Substantial policy changes within the State Secretariat or the Dicastery could disrupt AVEPRO's operational framework, leading to potential shifts in its priorities and activities.*

4. Challenges to AVEPRO's mission and impact.

- *AVEPRO may encounter difficulties in fully integrating the unique characteristics of Church institutions, such as their evangelizing mission, focus on integral formation, and relationship with the Church hierarchy. If the methodology is not sufficiently adapted to these distinct features, it could lead to inefficiencies or unintended consequences.*

- *The Agency faces competition from other global quality assurance agencies, which may already have established presences in various regions. In such contexts, AVEPRO must distinguish itself and demonstrate its unique value to effectively attract and retain Church institutions.*
- *While it's important to have a flexible methodology, especially when addressing different quality assurance systems around the world, there is a risk that this flexibility could undermine the strength (robustness) or accountability of the methodology. In other words, being too flexible might lead to inconsistencies or less reliability in the outcomes of evaluations, and it might make it harder to hold the methodology accountable to established standards.*

5. External challenges to AVEPRO's effectiveness.

- *The lack of clear accountability mechanisms within AVEPRO's evaluation process may reduce the motivation of institutions to implement recommended improvements. Without tangible consequences for non-compliance, the overall impact of AVEPRO's methodology may be diminished, potentially limiting the effectiveness of its quality assurance efforts.*
- *The rise of secular and instrumentalist models of higher education, which prioritise economic and practical outcomes, could challenge AVEPRO's mission to uphold the intrinsic value of education and its role in promoting human flourishing.*
- *The experience gained over the years through AVEPRO's guidelines and methodologies can be considered a Europe-centric approach. This may influence the initiation and development of evaluation processes in other regional contexts.*

3.5 The key strategic priorities for AVEPRO

The priorities described in this Section, derived from the SWOT analysis, provide a comprehensive roadmap for improving the quality, impact, and sustainability of AVEPRO's work, while ensuring alignment with its core mission in ecclesiastical higher education. The following list is not definitive as other inputs and considerations may come from the visit of ENQA and the definition of the Strategic Plan 2026-30 that AVEPRO will develop.

The priorities are based on **the following main strategical pillars:**

- Operational sustainability (priorities 1 to 3).
- Educational and cultural policies (priorities 5, 6 and 7).
- Priority 4 should be intended as a "bridge" that unifies the two pillars.

1. Fostering a culture of Quality

AVEPRO intends to:

- Define and implement a training and dissemination strategy.
- Improve methodology and consistency of the evaluation process.
- Enhance the quality and consistency of evaluation reports.
- Improve monitoring and accountability mechanisms.
- Monitor emerging trends in Higher Education and adapt accordingly.
- Stay attuned to evolving trends and challenges in the global higher education landscape, such as the increasing focus on digitalisation, internationalisation, and the demand for 21st-century skills.
- Foster a culture of quality requires a long-term, collective effort, including a shift in mindset from institutions and the agency, and will necessitate patience and dedication.

2. Adapt methodology also to the specific needs of non-European ecclesiastical HEIs

AVEPRO intends to:

- Recognise flexibility as an asset, and make sure that the evaluation methodology is fully adapted to the unique characteristics of Church institutions. These include their evangelising mission, focus on integral formation, and their relationship with the Church hierarchy.
- Value the deep understanding of the identity and mission of these institutions as a necessary step to tailor the evaluation process accordingly, ensuring that the specific characteristics of Church-based institutions are integrated.
- Examine regional specifics, particularly in non-European contexts, and consider modifying its methodology to address regional needs. This involves replacing the dominant European Higher Education Area (EHEA)-based model with a more regionally tailored approach

3. Enhancing organisational capacity and expertise

AVEPRO intends to:

- Review the relationship between the Board of Directors and Scientific Council (necessary to ensure that external resources and expertise are being utilised as effectively as possible)
- Enhance its own internal Quality. AVEPRO will develop further internal quality assurance tools to collect feedback, refine methodology, produce thematic analyses, and ensure their effective dissemination.
- Ensure adequate resources for effective functioning, this includes both seeking additional funding and optimising the management of current resources to ensure the long-term sustainability of the agency and its operations
- Develop and deliver training programs for internal and external quality assurance experts, along with a comprehensive dissemination strategy, including collaboration with IFCU
- Leverage technology to enhance processes

4. Strengthen collaboration with relevant stakeholders (eg other Quality Assurance Agencies)

AVEPRO intends to:

- Engage with regional ecclesiastical Higher Education networks. AVEPRO intends to establish stronger ties with regional structures of ecclesiastical higher education institutions. This will allow the agency to identify areas where it can contribute its expertise and experience, potentially broadening its focus beyond traditional quality assurance to include the sharing of good practices in areas like governance, leadership, and curriculum development
- Participate in collaborative networks so to align with global expectations and attract regional quality assurance agencies, particularly from outside Europe, fostering improved communication and collaboration.
- Forge strategic partnerships with other national and international bodies in order to disseminate its vision of Quality in HE.
- Support membership in INQAAHE so to strengthen the Agency's legitimacy and credibility within a global context.

5. Align AVEPRO's strategy with education and culture

AVEPRO intends to:

- Review its strategy to ensure closer alignment between education and culture, as reflected in the work of the Dicastery, and consider the impact of synodality on the agency's approach and methodology.

- Rethink how the Agency addresses regional differences and adapts its methodology to better fit non-European contexts.
- Enhance collaboration with the Dicastery of Culture and Education

6. Communicate international, cross-cultural insights effectively

AVEPRO intends to:

- Actively communicate the valuable insights and findings drawn from its international and cross-cultural perspective. This includes sharing its diverse expertise with the global higher education community and engaging in dialogue to further enrich the understanding of quality assurance in ecclesiastical institutions.

7. Support the mission and evangelisation of Catholic Higher Education

AVEPRO intends to:

- Strengthen its role in expressing and promoting Catholic higher education as a vital space for mission and evangelisation. The Agency will continue to work alongside Church institutions to articulate the distinctive contribution of faith-based higher education to human flourishing.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

2025 will be the year Rome will host the Jubilee¹³. More than 30 million pilgrims are expected¹⁴ with considerable repercussions on the city's infrastructure. The Agency, as an institution of the Holy See, will be invited to participate in a series of events and initiatives as part of the Jubilee celebrations.

AVEPRO will remember 2025 also because the Agency will host the third review of an ENQA-appointed panel. The previous visit took place a few months before the “lock down” of the COVID 19 pandemic, it was assumed that the experience would change the world but to date it does not appear that the impact was so highly transformative. But today, a new revolution is emerging, that of Artificial Intelligence.

We cannot yet predict the real impact on learning systems and on research but Higher Education will be overwhelmed by this revolution.

If this scenario is credible then the world of Quality Assurance will also be transformed. ESG will have to react to these innovations, methodologies will have to be reconsidered. QA Agencies will (most likely) not be able to understand whether a university's Self-Assessment Report is solely the product of human beings or was written in part or in whole by an artificial intelligence programme. The Agency, in alignment with its ethical commitment to transparency and academic integrity, will engage in further adapting its Guidelines providing ecclesiastical HEIs with clear guidance about how to indicate which sections have been generated or assisted by AI. This will ensure that evaluators can assess the report with full awareness of the sources of its content, maintaining trust in the review process.

In our opinion, AVEPRO is trying to offer a possible first answer to these challenges by investing a lot of energy in quality promotion which is an essential component (at the same time a starting and finishing point) of the evaluation. The Agency tries to foster a “culture” in which collaboration, networking, creativity and mutual support are the key features. We are aware that this implies to think and to act “out of the box”, the Agency does not stimulate a “market driven logic” and therefore it has a considerable freedom in its strategy and action. This activity has been initiated in particular in non-European contexts but will also concern institutions located in our continent in the coming years.

In this framework the 2025 ENQA coordinated site visit have been offered two main opportunities: the self evaluation touched on aspects related not only to the standards that were being assessed, and the SWOT made it possible to indicate some challenges and priorities for the Agency to consider in the coming years. We are confident that thanks to the Panel's work and expertise and the recommendations experts will address to AVEPRO, the Agency will be invited to continue along this path of development that focuses on the culture of quality as a service to students, their families, Academic Institutions and society as a whole.

¹³ <https://www.iubilaeum2025.va/en.html>. The Jubilee of the Catholic Church is a year of special grace, of remission of sins and the punishment due to them, a year of reconciliation between disputing parties.

¹⁴ Euronews "Jubilee 2025, Rome expects more than 30 million pilgrims in one year", 12 December 2024
<https://it.euronews.com/2024/12/12/giubileo-2025-roma-attende-oltre-30-milioni-di-pellegrini-in-un-anno>

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ACRONYMS

CCE	Congregation for Catholic Education
DCE	Dicastery for Culture and Education
EER	External Evaluation Report
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines
EUA	European University Association
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IFCU/FIUC	International Federation of Catholic Universities/Fédération des Universités Catholiques
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
QIP	Quality Improvement Plan
SAR	Self-Assessment Report
SER	Self-Evaluation Report
SWOT	Analysis Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats Analysis
WG	Working Group

ANNEXES

1. [AVEPRO Guidelines: Nature, context, purpose, standards and procedures of quality evaluation and promotion](#)
2. [AVEPRO Guidelines for Self-Evaluation](#)
3. AVEPRO Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance (Draft 2025 – Hard copy)
4. Marine Condette, “[Lex imperfecta, governance and persuasion: the case of quality assurance in Roman Catholic ecclesiastical higher education](#)”
5. [AVEPRO Guidelines for External-Evaluation](#)
6. [Set up of the Working Groups of the Scientific Council](#)
7. [Reporting and training of experts](#) (Output of the WG 2)
8. AVEPRO website ([External evaluation Reports page](#))
9. [AVEPRO Strategic Plan 2021-2025](#)
10. [Annual Operating Plan 2025](#)
11. AVEPRO, [Annual reports 2022-2024](#)
12. [Agreement AVEPRO – AAQ Switzerland](#)
13. [AVEPRO Guidelines on Strategic Planning](#)
14. Marine Condette, “[‘It’s paradoxical, but it works’ – Towards ambidexterity in external quality assurance: the case of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical higher education](#)”

OTHER RELEVANT DOCUMENTS

1. [Apostolic Constitution Ex corde ecclesiae](#) (John Paul II, 15 August 1990)
2. [Apostolic constitution Evangelii gaudium](#) (Francis, 24 November 2013)
3. [Apostolic Constitution Veritatis gaudium on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties](#) (Francis, 8 December 2017)
4. [AVEPRO Statute](#)
5. Minutes of the last Scientific Council and Board of Directors meetings (Hard copy)
6. Document about collaboration with IFCU (Hard copy)



AVEPRO

ENQA Targeted Review 2025
Self-Evaluation Report

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