

EXTERNAL EVALUATION REPORT
Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Benedikt XVI.
Heiligenkreuz, Austria

1. Introduction

The Avepro Review Group visited the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Benedikt XVI, located at Stift Heiligenkreuz, on May 31 and June 1, 2012. The Review Group had at its disposal the Self-Evaluation Report, plus addenda concerning evaluation of some courses according to the Avepro format, the publications of the teaching staff, and the extension plan of the campus. During the Review Group's visit, it became clear that the five-yearly report concerning 2007-2012, which the Great Chancellor Abbot Dr. Maximilian Heim and Rector Prof. Dr. Karl Wallner O.Cist. of the Hochschule had sent to the Congregation for Catholic Education on January 25, 2012, should also be taken into consideration. This document, which was not formally part of the documents for evaluation, was sent to the members of the Review Group by e-mail.

2. General comments on the Self-Evaluation Report

The Review Group considered the Self-Evaluation Report of the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Benedikt XVI as helpful and to the point regarding its indications on the profile of the Hochschule, its strengths and weaknesses. It consists on the one hand of a general introduction about the Hochschule's history, vision, mission, and a characterization of students and teaching staff and, on the other hand, of more detailed evaluation and reflections by the various institutes of the Hochschule. Alongside data on the evaluation of some courses and research outcomes by the teaching staff, feedback from a colleague of the Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät der Universität Wien was provided as an addendum.

3. Site visit

During the site visit, the Review Group had meetings with the Rector and Vice-Rector, with senior faculty members, with monastic and secular students, with the Rector of the Inter-diocesan Seminary Leopoldinum, with two elected student representatives and with Great Chancellor Abbot Dr. Maximilian Heim. On Thursday May 31, the Review Group had the opportunity to participate in the half-yearly faculty conference and to discuss various issues with the faculty. The Review Group was taken round the classrooms, the study facilities and the library. On Thursday, the Group attended the Terce and Sext in the Abbey Church and had lunch with the monks. In the evening it participated in the barbecue prepared and offered by the students of the Inter-diocesan Seminary, which the Review Group perceived as an illustration of the culture at the campus. This provided the Review Group with an excellent opportunity for informal contacts. The Review Group presented its findings and recommendations to the Rector and Vice-Rector on the afternoon of Friday, June 1. The atmosphere during the site visit was open and pleasant, and more informal than formal.

4. Current situation of the Hochschule

The Hochschule is a seminary for monastic Cistercian students from Austria and abroad (also non-native German speaking) and for students for the priesthood, living together in the Inter-diocesan Seminary Leopoldinum, established at the Stift Heiligenkreuz campus. Students for the priesthood who are

committed to new ecclesial movements or other abbeys, as well as lay students, which the Self-Evaluation Report characterizes as not yet having come to a decision about their vocation ("Berufungssuchende"), also study theology at Heiligenkreuz. Female students have also been admitted recently, following/subject to an intake conversation/interview with the Rector. A special category among the Hochschule's students consists of a considerable number of students from Germany who cannot be admitted to theological studies in their home country because they lack the necessary admission requirements for higher education (Abitur) and therefore start their studies in Austria. In 2011, 208 students studied at the Hochschule. They can graduate with an STB, which is also recognized as a master's degree in theology (STM) by the State of Austria. Education is offered in German.

In recent years, student numbers have steadily increased, and the Hochschule expects further growth in the years ahead. This growing student population, together with the presence of non-native German speaking students (for whom, moreover, German is anything but easy), constitute two of the major issues the Hochschule needs to deal with:

- How to create practical conditions for education and research so that the current number of students can be served adequately? This problem concerns the buildings/facilities above all (classrooms, library). Plans for building new facilities have been made, but funding has yet to be obtained, mainly by fundraising.
- How to organize the curriculum in such a way that non-native German speaking students can benefit from it as much as possible?

The teaching staff of the Hochschule consists on the one hand of Cistercians belonging to Stift Heiligenkreuz and members of other institutes of consecrated life, and on the other hand of professors who feel committed to the Hochschule's mission but generally do not receive any salary.

Recommendations and comments:

- 4.1. The Review Group sees one of the strengths of the Hochschule as the interweaving of study and the rhythm of monastic life. Students value this unity highly. Asked what makes Heiligenkreuz attractive to them, they immediately use terms such as 'Gemeinschaft' (community), 'campus' and 'wahrhaft katholisch' (truly catholic) and mention the corresponding informal culture and mutual identification. The Review Group had to keep on prompting before they mentioned 'some professors' as the most attractive element of their study program. Their emphasis on the unity of the community and study is not without a downside, in so far as the Review Group had the impression that this generation of students seems to give more weight to an environment of certainty and unanimity than to a more plural and varied one. According to the Review Group this situation implies a challenge for the staff, to confirm this experience of communion amongst the students on the one hand and, at the same time, to prepare them for working in a plural Church.
- 4.2. 60% of current students belong to the clergy, while 40% are lay faithful. Of this 40% a certain percentage has not yet decided about their future position in the Church or their vocation. In any case, many of them will be active in the Church as lay theologians, catechists or lay faithful. The curriculum, however, is exclusively oriented towards priestly formation. The Review Group recommends that the Hochschule consider how the curriculum could be adapted so that the lay students also could be prepared for future lay ministries.

5. Mission, objectives, strategic plan

The Hochschule presents the theology it provides as 'kneeling theology', to indicate a fruitful interaction between a life of prayer, Catholic culture and study. Moreover, the Hochschule intends to offer theology which is entirely loyal to the Magisterium of the Church. On this basis, the Hochschule aims to contribute to new evangelization, in particular by learning the skill of intellectual dialogue with people in a secularized society. The intention to offer a 'kneeling theology' is made possible by and fits in with the daily rhythm of monastic life, in which study has its own, quite ample, space in relation to other activities. The rector of the Leopoldinum would therefore welcome some more time for personal and spiritual formation of the students for priesthood, as theological education takes up 90 % of their time.

Comment:

- The Review Group could not obtain a clear answer to the question of when or through which curricular activities the students learn the abovementioned dialoguing skills.

6. Research

In a number of theological disciplines and specific research perspectives, the Hochschule has an academic reputation that surpasses the regional or national level. In this regard, mention should be made above all of the Europainstitut für Cistercienserforschung, which has been able to position itself as one of the leading research centers for the study of the Cistercian order, not least by taking over the journal *Analecta Cisterciensia*. The Europäisches Institut für Philosophie und Religion is also developing promising lines of research within the Hochschule, focusing on the thought and legacy of John Henry Cardinal Newman, Romano Guardini, Simone Weil and Edith Stein, among others. Finally, the Hochschule also plays a significant role in the current Ratzingerforschung.

The Self-Evaluation Report also included an extensive publication list, demonstrating the scholarly activity of the Hochschule staff members. Two remarks should be made with regard to this list, which the Self-Evaluation Report has already demonstrated awareness of: 1) given the fact that many staff members only have part-time positions in the Hochschule, the publication record is more indicative of the scholarly activity of the individual professors than of the institute; and 2) the publication list contains publications of very diverse scholarly scope and quality: from international, peer-reviewed scholarly publications to local publications without intellectual ambitions.

6.1. It is recommended that the institute develops a system to more clearly differentiate the publication output of staff members.

Further recommendations:

6.2. The Review Group encourages the Hochschule to develop a strategic plan for its research, in which it sets targets for the development of research. In the current situation, the Review Group recommends further developing the following research priorities:

- Cistercian studies
- monastic theology
- the thought of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

The Hochschule could achieve this by giving precedence to these research areas when investing in staff and facilities.

- 6.3. The Review Group further strongly encourages attracting and appointing more full-time tenured staff who can devote a considerable amount of their time to research. Moreover, it is important that the staff members with high academic qualifications (e.g. a habilitation degree) are actively given the opportunity and encouraged to pursue research activities.
- 6.4. In the long run, the scholarly identity and quality of the Hochschule will also depend on its ability to form academic **Nachwuchs/students**. As long as the institution does not have its own STL and STD-degree, collaboration with other institutions for higher learning, e.g. the Vienna Faculty of Theology, is the best way to move in this direction.
- 6.5. The state of the Hochschule's library is connected to its research potential. The Hochschule has a small institutional library with a reading room containing a selection of the most important publications and reference works in each of the theological disciplines, as well as offering computer facilities for students. This library is insufficient, however, for a Hochschule with academic ambitions, as the Hochschule itself is well aware. In this regard it is striking that in the survey conducted by the Hochschule, more than half of the alumni, who were usually very positive about the institution, either valued the library facilities as insufficient or said they had never used them. Fortunately, students also have good access to the monastery library, but this is also not up to date. The Review Group therefore strongly supports the institution's desire to build an up to date institutional library that can serve the needs of the students during their education, and that is sufficient in relation to the institution's research ambitions. Appointing a full-time professional librarian is crucial in this development. Since developing a library takes time, the students should in the mean time be actively encouraged to make use of the University of Vienna's well-stocked library and the electronic sources available, for example.

7. Education

In general, the Review Group appreciates Heiligenkreuz as an educational environment. A variety of ecclesiastical and theological experiences come together both from the sides of students and professors. The Hochschule aspires to offer a high level of education in a spirit of fidelity to the Magisterium. The main characteristics of its education, according to the Review Group, are:

- The close connection between monastic life and study
- The friendly atmosphere
- The variety and idealism of the teaching staff
- The generally well-considered choice of students.

The curriculum is organized in two cycles: one of three years and one of two years. Both cycles consist of modules that are each subdivided into small units of 1 to 3 credits (i.e. 25 to 75 student hours) which are examined separately. Due to these subdivisions, the overall number of examinations is very high, and, as exams take place shortly after the courses, do not really challenge students to further their study by themselves.

The curriculum is presented to the students in the form of lectures (sometimes followed by discussions), seminars **and pro-seminars**, and practicals. The most commonly used form of teaching is the lecture (Vorlesung). Lectures are scheduled each day of the week between 8 and 12 and 14-18, including Saturday morning, except on Thursday, i.e. in rather full days. Some courses are scheduled in the form of units lasting a few days (Blockvorlesungen) and examined immediately after the course. The attendance of lectures is obligatory. Students of the first, second and third year attend the same lectures together, which results in a group size of about 80 students.

The Hochschule is equipped with two larger auditoria and several classrooms for smaller groups. Modern electronic media are available in the classrooms. Study materials mainly consist of written notes prepared by the professors.

Recommendations:

- 7.1. According to the Review Group, the organization of the curriculum is too heavily teacher-oriented. The students' learning processes are based on the lecture as a form of didactic communication and the teacher's notes. As a consequence, students are generally encouraged to adopt a passive learning attitude. The Review Group recommends taking the students' learning process as a starting point for organizing courses more than currently takes place. This can be expected to result in more stimulating teaching and active learning. Among other things, this implies: a clear awareness of the students' starting conditions and competencies, a more realistic use of the hours corresponding to available credits, a better balance between contact hours and study hours, an improved daily timetable, a reasonable amount of time for preparing lectures and exams and becoming familiar with content matter, a challenge to get to know other authors and texts/(hand)books, and an invitation to make use of the library. Course descriptions should also be written from a student's perspective.
- 7.2. The Review Group suggests organizing a number of courses in the form of seminars.
- 7.3. The organization of the first cycle curriculum should be improved. Instead of the current system, in which (for instance) a student runs the risk of getting to know the history of the Church in reverse order - and despite a certain (understandable) tiredness and resistance to curricular reorganization - the Review Group recommends that the first year be organized separately from the second and third years. This first year could be given a realistic introductory character, in which representative foundation courses in the main theological disciplines are offered (e.g. an overview of Church history, of the history of philosophy, systematic theology, and an introduction to H. Scripture) alongside language courses (Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German). In the following years (when second and third year students could easily attend courses together), for instance, key topics, key periods or key figures could be dealt with in greater detail.
- 7.4. The organization of exams should be improved. Instead of many exams being held immediately after the end of a course or a unit, the Review Group recommends fewer larger exams, more variation in exam format (oral, written), a balanced spread over the academic year, and, in time, collegial review on topics such as the answerability and – in the light of specific course objectives – adequacy of questions.
- 7.5. The evaluation of professors by students should be enhanced. This would contribute to better communication between professors and students, and to a better understanding of the students.
- 7.6. Opportunities for contact between professors and students, also outside the courses, should be enhanced. Given the fact that many staff members only hold part-time positions, and that very few of the professors are present in the institution outside class hours, the current contact opportunities are unsatisfactory.
- 7.7. The Review Group suggests offering a course on theology of religions in the curriculum.
- 7.8. The Review Group is aware of the fact that these recommendations cannot all be implemented at once, as they are connected with the current building (im)possibilities and the fact that it can be difficult to schedule meetings of the teaching staff.

8. Governance and management

The Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Benedikt XVI is canonically connected to Stift Heiligenkreuz. Its Abbot is the Hochschule's Great Chancellor. The Review Group perceived the Hochschule as one of the ministries of the abbey, if not the main one, in which much is invested, in terms of both personnel and structural conditions (building, library). This investment needs to be considered as a long term effort. It is also an expensive investment, ultimately in the service of the Church in Austria and Germany.

The management of the Hochschule consists of the Rector and the Vice-Rector. Both are well qualified for their many tasks. Pater Rector in particular has a strong personality and natural authority; he strongly supports the students and is active in all areas concerning the Hochschule. The Review Group shared its concern with the Abbot and with the Rector and Vice-Rector that too much responsibility may be carried on too few shoulders.

The Hochschule is organized in 11 institutes: 9 of which cover the main disciplines of theology, and 2 of which are basically research-oriented (Europainstitut für Cistercienserforschung, Europäisches Institut für Philosophie und Religion). Each institute is managed by a professor.

Recommendations:

- 8.1. The Review Group underlines the necessity of regular contact between the members of the institutes. In the current situation, with a relatively high number of voluntary staff, the institutes are challenged to increase the mutual bond and co-operation between teaching and research.
- 8.2. The Review Group suggests the leadership of the Hochschule considers making formal contracts with its staff members, so that it can act in the case of unsatisfactory functioning.
- 8.3. The Review Group suggests creating a formal Teaching Committee to meet regularly (several times per semester), with the task of advising the management concerning the development of the institute's educational policy and organization, and all other issues pertaining to education. Students should be given due representation in this Committee.

9. Closing remarks

- 9.1. The Review Group is well aware of the Hochschule's ambition to acquire canonical permission to grant STL and STD degrees. It takes the position that the appropriate authorities should take into consideration the granting of STL degrees, on the condition that preconditions with regard to housing and the organization of the curriculum are fulfilled. The Review Group, however, is well aware of the fact that the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Benedikt XVI at Stift Heiligenkreuz, the Internationales Theologische Institut at Trumau and the Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät der Universität Wien are located close to each other. This situation could prompt increased co-operation, while each institute maintains its identity. This co-operation could be stimulated regarding research, in particular, which has a logical connection with the STL curriculum and a possible STD curriculum.
- 9.2. The Review Group suggests looking for contacts with theological institutes that have to deal with comparable conditions and circumstances, possibly in the English-speaking world.
- 9.3. The Review Group also suggests reconsidering the participation of the monastic students for whom the German language is too difficult. It wonders whether their studies would be more fruitful if they were conducted in another language.

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