



AVEPRO

STRATEGIC PLAN

2026 – 2030

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Introduction and Context

The Holy See Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO) recently celebrated its 18th anniversary in September 2025. In many legal systems, this milestone signifies the attainment of maturity, marking the transition to 'adulthood' for individuals.

As with any growth process, two macro categories of elements will have an impact on the Agency: 'endogenous' elements, i.e. those related to AVEPRO's own issues, and 'exogenous' elements, i.e. those originating from systems outside the Agency but in constant interaction with it. The first category includes, for example, the development of the skills of AVEPRO staff and the resources available, while the second category includes the innovations that Pope Leo's Magisterium will bring to the field of higher education, collaboration with agencies and networks active in the field of quality, but also, as recent years have shown, international political events or global health emergencies.

This theme allows us to highlight what will most likely be the key expression of the next strategic plan: global commitment. Following the insights and wishes of Pope Francis and thanks to the impetus of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, AVEPRO launched a strategy in 2024 to promote quality outside Europe. In the two-year period 24-25, four regional seminars were held, involving academic institutions from around 50 different countries. The first fruits of this commitment were a number of evaluation visits, particularly in Latin America but also in Africa and Asia. The next five years will necessarily be characterised by a gradual opening up to other contexts where ecclesiastical universities or faculties are present. In order to support this plan, it will be necessary to organise the Agency's work in a concrete manner. This document represents the first step.

Vision and Mission of the Agency

The mission of the Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties is to promote and develop a culture of quality within all the academic institutions that depend directly on the Holy See and ensure they possess internationally valid and accepted quality criteria and standards.

AVEPRO's vision is to support ecclesiastical academic communities around the world in serving the Church and societies in accordance with the Magisterium of the Church. The evaluation and promotion of quality must be considered as means aimed at fostering the continuous improvement of responsible and mature academic institutions that operate in the light of the joy of truth (*Veritatis Gaudium*).

In order to achieve these goals, the Agency collaborates globally with all actors in Church life and civil society who are interested in, and committed to the life and progress of ecclesiastical universities

and faculties, by inspiring mutual trust and cooperation through the fostering of networking and partnerships at different levels.

“Christian education is a collective endeavour: no one educates alone. The educational community is a “we” where teachers, students, families, administrative and service staff, pastors and civil society converge to generate life.”¹

It is important to underline that “Christian formation embraces the entire person: spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, physical. It does not pit manual and theoretical skills, science and humanism, technology and conscience against each other; rather, it demands that professionalism be imbued with ethics, and that ethics be not an abstract concept but a daily practice. Education does not measure its value only on the axis of efficiency: it measures it according to dignity, justice, the capacity to serve the common good. This integral anthropological vision must remain the cornerstone of Catholic pedagogy. Following in the wake of the thought of Saint John Henry Newman, it goes against a strictly mercantilist approach that often forces education today to be measured in terms of functionality and practical utility”².

The Agency is fully aware that it needs to assist HEIs to make an impact on society from a number of standpoints, including education, research, third mission and general community services and public commentary.

Review of previous plan

AVEPRO's strategic plan for 2021-2025 was divided into eight priorities:

1. Avepro organisation, governance and resources
2. Quality promotion: building and strengthening capacity for high quality in its institutions and with stakeholders within the context of sustainability
3. Quality evaluation: strengthening the HEI capacity, structures and processes for internal institutional self-evaluation and improvement
4. Quality evaluation: strengthening external evaluation processes
5. Establishment of evaluation cycles over the 2021-25 period, in specific regional settings
6. Establishment of a five-year strategy to fulfil the given global role of avepro
7. Institutional responsiveness to the magisterium and teaching of the church
8. Communications and networking strategy differentiated for various stakeholders and interest groups

¹ Congregation for Catholic Education, Instruction “The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue” (25 January 2022), no. 32

² Pope Leo XIV, “*Drawing new maps of hope*”, Apostolic Letter on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Conciliar Declaration Gravissimum educationis, Saint Peter Basilica, 25 October 2025

The Plan was certainly very ambitious and was strongly influenced by the particular historical moment in which it was drawn up, with the world caught between the uncertainty of the post-pandemic future and Europe witnessing the outbreak of war within its own region. AVEPRO, like many other institutions globally, initially sought to address these two challenges by adopting a 'defensive' tactic of maintenance and containment, particularly in the years 2021-2022. In 2023, the Agency renewed its leadership and, with the arrival of the new President, together with the change in the leadership of the (at that time) Congregation for Catholic Education, the desire to restart and expand the Agency's scope of action emerged.

A quick analysis of the strategic priorities leads to the conclusion that, with regard to the first priority, namely AVEPRO as an organisation, despite the budget cuts that affected the entire world of higher education, the Agency was able to carry out and complete its institutional activities. During the five-year period, three working groups created within the Scientific Council worked intensively. The experience has been generally positive, although it has emerged that the personal commitment of certain individuals can be a factor in the success (or failure) of the various WGs. In 2025, full membership of ENQA was confirmed for the third time and the Agency also became a member of INQAAHE.

The second and sixth priorities (promoting quality and defining a strategy to foster the development of AVEPRO's global role) were probably the two priorities in which the most investment was made. The four regional seminars (in 2024 and 25) for North and South America, Africa and Asia not only allowed the Agency to present its approach and evaluation methodology, but also enabled it to begin structuring a network and partnerships with ecclesiastical academic institutions around the world.

Priorities 3 and 4 (Internal and External Evaluation) were probably the most critical part of the Strategic Plan. Few objectives were achieved, although the Working Group's activities led to the definition of new guidelines for self-evaluation and the drafting of several Position Statements. In addition, the Agency began offering all institutions a personalised pathway for starting to draft their self-evaluation reports, involving two experts in a Zoom meeting who described both what the institution is required to write and what the external evaluation committee appointed by AVEPRO generally expects.

Priority 5 has been affected by a well-known feature of AVEPRO's work, namely the difficulty of requesting evaluation processes every five years. While it is understandable that HE Institutions suffer from 'review fatigue' and that the added value decreases with each successive evaluation cycle, it should also be considered that the five-year interval may be reconsidered in light of what is happening in other contexts. This issue may be discussed with the councils and defined in the Agency's future guidelines.

Priority 7 (Quality Assurance and the Magisterium of the Church) was addressed by a working group that drafted a position statement on the relationship between the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium* and other documents of the Magisterium. AVEPRO will continue this action by seeking to offer ideas to ecclesiastical faculties, listening to the words and analysing the writings of Pope Leo.

Priority 8 was enhanced both through participation in international networks (ENQA, INQAAHE, FIUC) and through the aforementioned regional seminars, which brought the Agency into direct contact with ecclesiastical academic institutions around the world. Particular attention was also paid to relations with the Roman Curia, in particular with the Dicastery for Culture and Education.

Undoubtedly, the 'highest point' of the activities related to this priority was the private audience that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, granted to the President of AVEPRO on 4 March 2024.

In conclusion, therefore, even though the Strategic Plan set out very ambitious goals for a small organisation such as AVEPRO, the Agency has shown that it is able to emerge from the pandemic with renewed energy and has embarked on an intensive process of 'reaching out' to ecclesiastical universities and faculties around the world. It is necessary to continue with what has been started, balancing the sustainability of the actions with the service that the Agency seeks to offer to the Universal Church.

Cornerstones and conditioning factors of the Strategic Planning

Within the scope of AVEPRO's activities, the "Magisterium" concerns the way in which the official teaching of the Catholic Church guides, inspires and sets criteria for evaluating and promoting a culture of quality in universities and, in general, in ecclesiastical academic institutions. Education, and higher education in particular, is one of the areas of great importance because it affects the integral formation of the person and the future of society.

The definition of the Plan must be constructed in the light of certain 'cornerstones' of the Holy See's higher education system, such as *'Veritatis gaudium'*, the Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, the guiding principles of AVEPRO's action (Gratuitousness, Persuasion, Positive and Critical Reflection), , specific documents produced by the Dicastery for Culture and Education, the responsibilities arising from the Holy See's adherence to international agreements and treaties, the customs arising from interaction with the academic community and the networks that associate Quality Assessment Agencies.

In addition to certain documents considered "fundamental" in the field of education, such as *Gravissimum Educationis* (Second Vatican Council, 1965), *Sapientia christiana* (1979), *Fides et Ratio* (1998), *Veritatis gaudium* (2017), many speeches and interventions by both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have not only contributed to broadening the scope of education by bringing fields such as the environment, economics and social justice closer to integral human formation. Therefore, the quality of ecclesiastical academic institutions must also take into account the teachings derived from *Laudato Si* (2015), *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living* (2019), *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) and various aspects of the social doctrine of the church. The implications of these for ecclesiastical institutions are profound, since they represent the Church's Magisterium, and it is appropriate that AVEPRO should promote the above in respect of their implications for the quality, style and content of education and learning pathways, research and community service and societal engagement by institutions, not forgetting their governance and management. All these highlight the need to update and adapt the concept and practice of quality, and the means by which AVEPRO can activate institutional change.

The Agency is fully aware of the context in which Universities find themselves eg sustainability, need of partnership, need of inter faith dialogue and that with societal partners. This is important to ensure our Universities are producing high quality outcomes in very competitive HE environments.

Quality and the challenges facing Institutions

Universities globally face existential threats, including severe financial constraints, declining enrollment due to demographic shifts, and rising competition from alternative education pathways. Key challenges include integrating AI into pedagogy, maintaining academic freedom, and adapting to rapid technological advancements while ensuring sustainability.

Among the Current and Future Challenges for Universities it is possible to include.

Financial Sustainability & Enrollment: Many institutions face severe financial pressure, rising operational costs, and declining student numbers (the "enrolment cliff"), leading to mergers and closures.

Technological Disruption & AI: Universities are struggling to adapt to Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data, and virtual reality, which are transforming how education is delivered and assessed.

Digital Transformation: Moving from traditional, rigid models to flexible, "learn from anywhere" approaches is necessary but technically and culturally challenging.

Value Proposition & Reputation: Public skepticism regarding the value of a degree and high student debt is increasing pressure on universities to justify their costs.

Geopolitical & Social Pressures: Rising geopolitical tensions affect international student mobility and research collaboration.

Academic Freedom: Academic freedom is facing threats from political interference, limiting the ability of researchers to operate freely.

Faculty & Staff Development: Universities face aging workforces, increased workloads, and the need to upskill staff in new teaching methodologies.

Environmental & Climate Change: Institutions are grappling with the need to improve sustainability and respond to the impacts of climate change.

Some of these challenges, being global, also affect ecclesiastical academic institutions. In particular, the decline in student numbers in some parts of the world is a particularly pressing issue. Quality can be a response to these challenges and it should not be seen as a defensive approach to saving a system in crisis. On the contrary, since 'old patterns' cannot be applied to new problems, the place of formation and development of critical thinking (HE Institutions) appears to be exactly the place where alternative models should be proposed. Pope Francis had already indicated this path in the Foreword of *Veritatis gaudium*. Consistent with this, AVEPRO intends to support the tension to continuous improvement of ecclesiastical academic institutions in their formative role for the younger generations. This Strategic Plan seeks to offer a contribution so that the Agency has a clear direction to follow in the next (turbulent) five years.) It follows from the above that, in its Quality Promotion function, AVEPRO should provide guidance in the way of Position Statements and Notes of Guidance containing recognised good practice to help HEI address the issues systematically. Similarly, in its institutional reviews, AVEPRO should be considering the adequacy of institutional responses to these challenges, and suggesting ways by which quality may be improved in particular settings. This principle is translated into the concrete actions for AVEPRO which follow.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2026-2030

The Agency's Plan provides for the integration of activities that can be traced back to different objectives. Therefore, it should not be understood as a sequence of unrelated actions but as the integrated activity of a single 'body' that finds expression in closely related areas.

The strategic priorities for the five-year period 2026-2030 are:

- 1) PROMOTION OF QUALITY AND DISSEMINATION OF GOOD PRACTICES
- 2) INTERNAL QUALITY EVALUATION: STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES, RESOURCES AND TOOLS TO IMPLEMENT SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESSES
- 3) EXTERNAL QUALITY EVALUATION: DEFINITION OF MECHANISMS TO GENERATE ADDED VALUE FOLLOWING EXTERNAL ASSESSMENTS
- 4) INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO THE MAGISTERIUM AND TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH in light of current challenges and those foreseeable in the near future (e.g., climate change, migration, artificial intelligence)
- 5) AVEPRO ORGANISATION, GOVERNANCE AND RESOURCES IN THE LIGHT OF THE GLOBAL ROLE OF THE AGENCY
- 6) COMMUNICATIONS AND NETWORKING STRATEGY DIFFERENTIATED FOR VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS AND INTEREST GROUPS

Objectives and actions in relation to strategic plan priorities

1. PROMOTION OF QUALITY

Main objective:

- To spread a culture of quality in ecclesiastical academic institutions globally

Basic actions:

- Develop supporting network of partner organisations in the various global regions appropriate to particular needs and settings, in order to ensure that AVEPRO's aims of promotion and quality improvement have a secure organisational base
- Organisation and implementation of regional seminars and meetings in different areas of the world
- Initiation of regular cycles of embedded evaluation processes
- Ensure that there is robust documentation which is widely used to help Institutions and evaluators alike. Position statements and guidelines will be expanded to address new areas of challenges like partnership, sustainability and research degrees

2. INTERNAL QUALITY EVALUATION

Main objective:

- Strengthening Institutional capacities, resources and tools for carrying out self-evaluation processes, leading to specific plans for Institutional development

Basic actions:

- Definition of a training strategy for ecclesiastical universities and faculties
- Implementation of training for institutions
- Continuation of Zoom meetings to kick off self-assessment
- Dissemination of guidelines and position statements to ensure that self-evaluation is robust and relevant and that factors related to Institutional sustainability are addressed.

3. EXTERNAL QUALITY EVALUATION

Main objective:

- Definition of mechanisms to generate added value following external evaluations
- Review the cycle of external evaluation in terms of ensuring there is no burden on the Institutions and the evaluation process determinates an added value

Basic actions:

- Supporting, including through training, the experts involved in external evaluation commission
- Standardise external evaluation reports both in format and robustness
- Update guidelines, ensuring concrete flexibility in their implementation
- Ensure that follow up and monitoring processes are comprehensive, timely and robust both within Institutions and AVEPRO

4. INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO THE MAGISTERIUM AND TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH in light of current challenges and those foreseeable in the near future (e.g., climate change, migration, artificial intelligence)

Main objective:

- To adapt constantly the concept of Quality and the indicators derived from it to the Magisterium of the Church and the guidelines of Pope Leo in a mutually reiterative manner

Basic actions:

- Prepare documents (position statements in particular) that collect and distil the messages of Pope Leo's Magisterium relating to the field of education in terms of the implications for Universities' vision and activities
- Offer academic institutions opportunities for information and reflection on socially relevant issues that have an impact on higher education, through various appropriate forms of dissemination both documentary and otherwise

5. AVEPRO ORGANISATION, GOVERNANCE AND RESOURCES IN THE LIGHT OF THE GLOBAL ROLE OF THE AGENCY

Main objective:

- Ensure that the structure and organisation of AVEPRO and its partnership networks are sufficient to achieve its goals and objectives

Basic actions:

- Provide opportunities for employee training and development with particular attention to the person that will be appointed in 2026
- Revise the Statute and the terms of reference and start of the reorganization of the workload in the Agency
- Reconsider the role and support of Council and Board members and experts associated with AVEPRO with a view to maximising their contributions in terms of support the Agency in training activities, drafting papers, participating in workshops and other tasks deemed appropriate by the secretariat
- Establish a training group with a core membership of experts in QA supported by faculties of Ecclesiastical Universities
- Ensure the drafting and updating of the documents and tools necessary for the Agency to carry out its institutional activities as indicated by the norms of the Holy See
- Continue with the fundraising strategy to ensure the progress of the agency's work and implement the Project founded by donors

6. COMMUNICATIONS AND NETWORKING STRATEGY DIFFERENTIATED FOR VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS AND INTEREST GROUPS

Main objective:

- Strengthen institutional communication and the Agency's collaboration and support networks in order to improve the service offered to academic institutions

Basic actions:

- Increase the visibility of the Agency's actions through specific institutional communication
- Redefine the Agency's website
- Participate in international events, training and conferences
- Consolidate AVEPRO's presence and activities with the various bodies and institutions of the Roman Curia, in particular the DCE

ANNUAL OPERATING PLANS

This Strategic Plan is designed to indicate the principal priority areas to be addressed by the Agency for 2026-2030, and the accompanying objectives and actions which give effect to them. It is apparent that not all the actions proposed can, or should be completed at an early stage in the planning period. This would be impossible given the size of the task; the limited capacity of the AVEPRO Bureau, and the inescapable fact that some actions have greater priority than others, in the senses of political necessity, timeliness or logical sequence. Consequently, whilst the SP is for a 5-year planning period, actions will need to be distributed sensibly and systematically across the period. One of the important factors here is the fact that there is a dependency factor in that some activities need to be started or completed before others can be commenced. Thus, earlier activities assume the role of building blocks which will make other activities possible.

Accordingly, the 5-year programme needs to be differentiated into more manageable annual portions, so-called Annual Operating Plans. These are composed of actions derived from the overall strategic plan, but we are sensitive to the need for flexibility, with the result that the process will be a cyclical rolling process rather than a linear one. It is recognised that new unforeseen challenges may arise which may require different or additional actions; that some envisaged actions may not be needed; or that there may be some slippage year on year which may lead to some actions being deferred or extended beyond the given year. The imperative is to be realistic in terms of what can, or needs to be done.

Main activities for 2026 consistent with AVEPRO's 2026-2030 Strategic Plan

Priorities	Main activities	2026											
		J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
1-6	Toronto Seminar Organisation	■	■	■	■	■	■						
1	Update position statements and Guidelines on Strategic planning, self-evaluation reports and external evaluation reports	■	■	■	■	■	■						
1	Define new position statements on eg sustainability, Institutional partnerships and research degrees				■	■	■	■	■	■			
1-2	Organisation of the Bogota Seminar					■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
1-2	Implementation of the two seminars						■					■	
1-2-3	Launch of the Hilton Foundation Project	■	■	■									
2	Definition and implementation of a training strategy for ecclesiastical universities and faculties			■	■	■							
2	Training for institutions wishing to initiate self-assessment processes				■		■			■	■		
3	Training for potential external evaluation experts				■		■			■	■		
3	Standardisation of external evaluation reports							■	■	■			
4-6	Drafting of the final report for the Porticus project		■	■									
4	Organisation of Agency Council meetings								■	■	■		
4	Training phase for new AVEPRO employee					■	■	■					
4	Administrative and financial management	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
5	Update of the Position Statement on Magisterium and Quality in Higher Education							■	■	■	■		
5	Establish a training group							■	■	■	■		
6	Website update							■	■	■			
6	Participation in ENQA INQAAHE ACCU events		■		■						■	■	