

AVEPRO

ELEMENTS FOR A  
“MID-TERM” SELF-ASSESSMENT



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## 1. Presentation of the Agency

The Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO), established by the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI with a *Chirograph* dated 19 September 2007, is an institution connected to the Holy See, as provided by arts. 186 and 190-191 of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*.

The Holy See's adherence to the Bologna Process (which took place on 19 September 2003, during a meeting of the European Ministers of Higher Education in Berlin) was determined by its desire to pursue and achieve certain objectives provided for within the Bologna Process, including:

- Respect for the specificity and diversity of the various university systems;
- Creation of a common European Higher Education Area to encourage the involvement of university institutions in an international dimension;
- Focus on quality as a value intrinsic to and necessary for research and innovation in universities.

AVEPRO's activities are regulated by the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana* (15 April 1979) and conform to the *European Standards and Guidelines*, as well as other international agreements concerning rules and procedures for the evaluation of quality in higher education.

In accordance with the provisions of the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Agency is entrusted with the task of promoting and evaluating Academic Quality within the Ecclesiastical Faculties situated in Europe.

This **mission** of the Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO) is to **promote and develop a culture of quality within the Academic Institutions that are directly dependent upon the Holy See** and ensure they possess internationally valid quality criteria, as established by the Bologna Process.

In accordance with the Agency's **independent** nature, it **collaborates with all actors interested in the life and progress of Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties**: the Institutions themselves, the Congregation for Catholic Education, the Episcopal Conferences, all regional, national and international authorities, and all those who work in the various dioceses of countries in which Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions are based.

Till now, AVEPRO's activities have been directed to the European geographical area and the

results are shown in the following table (**data updated at October 2018**):

EUROPE	INSTITUTIONS		FACULTIES		
	PRESENT	EVALUATED	PRESENT	EVALUATED	EVALUATIONS CONDUCTED
AUSTRIA*	8	3	10	5	6*
BELGIUM	3	0	5	0	0
BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA	1	0	1	0	0
CROATIA	4	0	4	0	0
CZECH REP.	2	0	2	0	0
FRANCE*	8	7	15	14	18*
GERMANY	26	0	28	0	0
HUNGARY	1	0	2	0	0
IRELAND	1	1	3	1	1
ITALY*	12	8	13	9	9
LITHUANIA*	1	1	1	1	4*
MALTA	1	0	1	0	0
THE NETHERLANDS	1	0	1	0	0
POLAND	13	2	24	3	3
PORTUGAL	1	1	2	1	1
ROME <sup>2</sup> (HOLY SEE)*	24	22	57	55	62*
SLOVAKIA	3	1	3	1	1
SLOVENIA	1	0	1	0	0
SPAIN	11	11	24	23	23
SWITZERLAND	4	0	4	0	0
	<b>126</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>128</b>
	<i>INSTITUTIONS</i>		<i>FACULTIES</i>		

Table 1: General frame of the Ecclesiastical Institution and Faculties in Europe

\* Nation/Country where there are Institutions that are undergoing (or have already completed) the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle of evaluation

Regarding the **Institutions**, the table presents:

- number of Institutions present in each Nation/Country
- number of Institutions that has been evaluated by AVEPRO (1<sup>st</sup> cycle).

<sup>2</sup> Note that the city of Rome has been elevated by us to the status of a “Geographical Area” due to the considerable number of Pontifical Institutions present at its territory.

Regarding the **Faculties**, the table presents:

- number of Faculties present in each Nation/Country
- number of Faculties that has been evaluated by AVEPRO (1<sup>st</sup> cycle)
- number of EVALUATIONS CONDUCTED by AVEPRO that includes:
  - Faculties (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>sd</sup> cycle)
  - Institutes different from Faculties (eg. Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences/HIRS) (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>sd</sup> cycle)
  - Seminaries (1<sup>st</sup> cycle)



Figure 1: General frame of the Ecclesiastical Institution and Faculties in Europe

## 2. Organization

Following the approval of the revised Statutes (May 2015), the Agency has seen its characteristics and organization confirmed, and some of its opportunities and responsibilities increase.

The Agency collaborates with the Academic Institutions in defining internal procedures to evaluate the quality of teaching, research, services, etc., which is done through the development and use of appropriate operational tools (databases, information networks, etc.). AVEPRO also plans external evaluation procedures for individual Academic Institutions and arranges visits to them by experts.

The following are Organs of the Agency:

- (a) the **President**, who runs and represents the Agency
- (b) the **Board of Directors**, presided over by the President of the Agency, which approves



the Agency's general approaches and supervises its activities, checking the results. Normally meets at least once a year, when convened by the President.

- (c) the **Scientific Council** is presided over by the President of the Agency; assists him in the preparation of instruments of use in conducting the Agency's activities; provides suggestions and reasoned opinions on the procedures used or to be used for the evaluation of quality; cooperates in the selection and training of the experts appointed to conduct the evaluations; and can also, if requested by the President of the Agency, express reasoned opinions regarding the individual evaluations conducted or to be conducted, or on any other matter. The Scientific Council meets in plenary session at least once every two years, when convened by the President. When he deems it appropriate, the President can also convene members of the Scientific Council via means of distance communication.

The following are also part of the Agency:

- (a) the **Director** and related staff. The Director coordinates the work of the offices and staff in the implementation of the Agency's programmes and execution of its tasks and is in charge of both management and accounting aspects of the Agency's administration, assisted by his staff.
- (b) the Agency's **Staff**.

The Agency uses the services of experts for the external evaluation of the Ecclesiastic Academic Institutions.

### **3. The new version of the Agency's Statutes and the redefinition of AVEPRO's areas of work**

Five years after AVEPRO's Statute was initially approved on an experimental basis, the Agency, together with the Congregation for Catholic Education and Secretary of State, selected a Commission to draft a proposal for the amendment and re-approval of the Statutes.

In short, the 3 main points of the proposed amendment were:

- the possibility of expanding AVEPRO's jurisdiction to Catholic Universities
- geographical divisions and other models of cooperation to develop with other agencies (joint evaluation)
- Scientific Council: tasks, frequency of meetings, institution of appeal procedure

The Commission's task culminated in the re-approval of the Statutes, which effectively contain all the suggestions that emerged from its work. In this context, AVEPRO's main areas of activity are now:

- The **promotion and evaluation of academic quality** with the aim of fostering the continuous improvement of Institutions - clearly distinct from the task of **accreditation** (competence of the Congregation for Catholic Education);
- The maintenance of system-level unity throughout the whole quality framework, while remaining aware of and seeking to appreciate the specificities and the differences within the **Holy See's Higher Education system**, which involves the presence of Ecclesiastical Faculties in many European and non-European countries and therefore the need to coordinate different systems and legal orders;



- A **multi-level model of governance**, which must take into consideration the joint activities of the considerable number of actors involved (Vatican Secretary of State, Congregation for Catholic Education, Episcopal Conferences, local Bishops, religious orders, various national institutions, as well as the academic Institutions);
- The coexistence (within the framework of a common approach) and, in various countries, the simultaneous presence, of **Catholic Universities** and Faculties in addition to the Ecclesiastical ones.

Following the Congregation for Catholic Education's Plenary Assembly in 2014, various Cardinals suggested considering the possibility of extending AVEPRO's competence to include the Catholic Universities. This question was also put to and discussed with the Secretary of State, leading to one of the greatest innovations in the new version of AVEPRO's Statute.

Article 4 of the revised Statute now states in paragraph 2:

*“For any specific exigencies the Agency, with the consent of the Congregation for Catholic Education, can implement forms of cooperation with other Institutions in order to respond to the demands of different countries or geographical areas. In such cases the Institutions must gain the approval of the Episcopal Conference they belong to”.*

It was deemed appropriate to opt for a “rather vague” formulation, with the aim of not explicitly citing Catholic Universities in the text of the Statute. This is also intended to prevent the risk of other Agencies requiring a sort of “reciprocity”, possibly involving evaluations of Institutions belonging to the Holy See's Higher Education system.

Moreover, and with the intention of providing a very concise picture of the complexity of AVEPRO's areas of activity, it is important to mention:

- The strength of a network and capillary relations providing both technical and logistic support (think, for example, of the nunciatures present throughout the world), which allow and facilitate the circulation of information and the sourcing of experts for evaluations
- The presence of Academic Institutions connected to specific religious orders, which consequently provide a particular contribution to research and teaching within the context of the Holy See's Higher Education system.

The experience gained over the years has also made it possible to understand how cooperation with national agencies can help lighten the burdens of bureaucracy for the staff of the Ecclesiastical Faculties present in various countries (so far the geographical area of reference remains Europe). It is therefore deemed desirable to continue with this policy of creating mechanisms of trust and exchange with the national Agencies, also through active participation in networks and international bodies.

#### **4. Preliminary results concerning the evaluation processes and QA from AVEPRO's perspective**

In defining its own standards and procedures, AVEPRO has had to refer to the various definitions and approaches related to academic quality present in the literature.

Following painstaking analysis, it has been agreed that the **definition of “quality”** that best fits the



Agency's purpose is:

**Correspondence to ends (purpose, mission):** Quality is judged as the extent to which an activity or service **fulfils its established purpose**. The purpose may be defined by the “receiver” in relation to whether his/her expectations are satisfied, or (in the field of education) concern the extent to which the institution fulfils its mission (course objectives).

The Agency has therefore sought to define and create a methodological architecture that would allow it to remain faithful to the provisions of *Sapientia Christiana* in relation to the Faculties and, at the same time, comply with the “*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*” (ESG), amended and re-approved by the European Education Ministers in 2015.

Extremely briefly, the ***distinctive features of this approach*** regard the following aspects:

- (a) the promotion and evaluation of quality conducted by AVEPRO is concerned with the progressive improvement of quality in the activities of university institutions, from the points of view of research, teaching, and internal management. It is not concerned with the procedures for achieving “accreditation” of a university institution by a competent authority. In fact, in the case of Ecclesiastical Faculties and Universities, the Congregation for Catholic Education is the competent organ of the Holy See for accreditation.
- (b) evaluation consists of two distinct but complementary phases: internal evaluation (conducted by the institution itself) and the “external” evaluation conducted by an agency dedicated to this purpose. More specifically, for internal evaluation an institutional evaluation team is formed - composed of teaching staff, representatives of the non-teaching staff and students - and prepares a Self-Evaluation Report. The external evaluation, on the other hand, is conducted by an independent agency, with reference to norms and procedures to be followed on the basis of established criteria. For each external evaluation, AVEPRO appoints an independent evaluation team of previously selected and trained experts.
- (c) the dimensions evaluated are all those that impact the life of an academic community, e.g.: study and research, choice of courses, resources available and sources of funding, how courses are taught, and how well the administrative structures function.

AVEPRO has conducted evaluations in over half of the European Ecclesiastical Faculties (approximately 100) and worked in eight different countries. The Agency itself has also begun a process of learning. The initial reflections arising from this process have identified as possible areas for improvement:

- **Documentation and formats:** greater visibility needs to be given to the formats that the Agency proposes for the preparation of the reports (both SER and external); it may be appropriate to adapt them according to Institutional dimensions (e.g. individual Faculties and Institutions with two or more Faculties).
- **Process dynamics:** evaluation does not end with the visit, but continues with the definition of the Quality Improvement Plan and especially with the internalization of resources, competences and people who act within the Institution to reinforce the Quality culture.
- **Participation:** The role of participation in the preparation of the SER should be emphasized, as well as the importance of creating a stable Quality Committee within the academic Institution.
- **SWOT analysis:** the role and importance of the SWOT analysis needs to be insisted upon in



order to permit meta-analysis at the system level (the examples of financial fragility, shrinking numbers of students and the growing numbers of non-permanent teaching staff in the Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions are emblematic: if this is a systemic trend, what countermeasures can be taken?).

- **Clarification of the reasons why Academic Institutions are required to undergo the evaluation process:** the origin and reasons behind the whole evaluation process need to be remembered, also highlighting how the creation of the Agency itself (and therefore the processes and procedures it proposes to the Institutions) is a direct consequence of the Holy See's adherence to the Bologna Process. This international agreement has been ratified by 48 countries and, as such, should be seen as both the expression of a political will on the part of the Holy See and, in a certain way, as "binding" (albeit not in the strict sense from a juridical viewpoint) in relation to a whole series of activities, processes and procedures to be realized in the context of higher education.

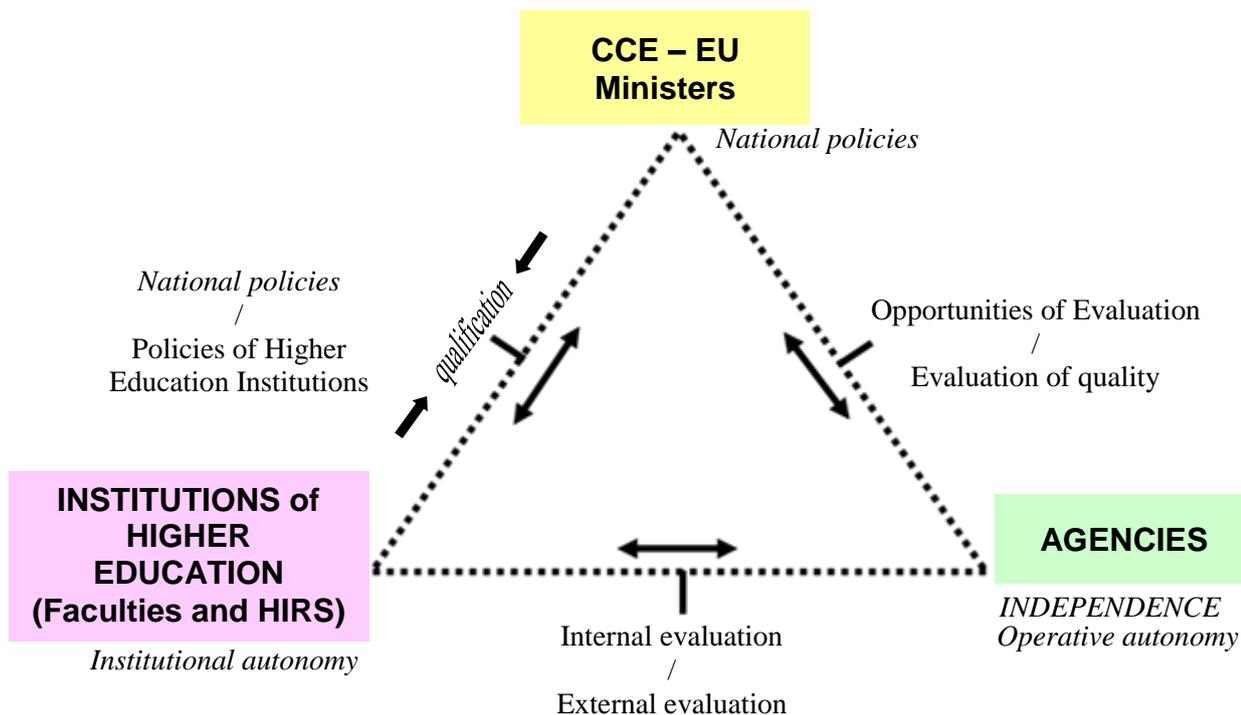
These preliminary remarks will be put to the Agency's governing bodies with the aim of identifying the best ways in which to transform (if deemed appropriate and feasible) the points outlined above into concrete actions.

## **5. Future activities: challenges, criticalities and opportunities for the Holy See's Higher Education system from AVEPRO's perspective**

The situation regarding the Agency's activities described above demands the consolidation of a series of challenges and the launch of other processes, which will impact not only AVEPRO but also other actors involved in the Holy See's Higher Education system.

In short, the main challenges are to:

1. proceed with and hopefully complete the first cycle of evaluation in all European countries where Ecclesiastical Faculties are located
2. launch evaluation processes in Ecclesiastical Faculties located beyond Europe
3. experiment with the application of AVEPRO's model of evaluation in Catholic Universities
4. increase the **capacity to manage diversity** (regulatory, structural, relational) **while maintaining intact the organic and unified nature of the system**
5. strengthen and improve the system of relations among **the multitude of actors involved in evaluation** (Congregation for Catholic Education, AVEPRO, Episcopal Conferences, local Bishops, religious orders, various national institutions such as accreditation agencies and Ministries for Education and Research, as well as the Academic Institutions themselves, of course)



6. increase the Agency's staff in order to render its response to the demands of various institutional contacts, and above all to Academic Institutions, more satisfactory – this need is becoming increasingly central and urgent
7. increase awareness of the importance of the process of quality and the structures dedicated to it within each Institution
8. increase the critical input of students within the context of evaluation, supporting their centrality in the learning process and academic life
9. create the conditions to boost awareness within Academic Institutions of across-the-board issues regarding Higher Education, and above all internationalization
10. support and strengthen the process of training for the experts called upon to conduct evaluation visits
11. make the results deriving from completion of the evaluation process increasingly more useful to the governance of Academic Institutions
12. offer the Congregation for Catholic Education, Grand Chancellors and Ecclesiastical Institutions involved information, facts and reports that facilitate debate, constant comparison and updating in relation to Higher Education issues
13. maintain and strengthen the Agency's presence in the various international networks, which is broadly appreciated
14. offer answers and cooperation in response to the growing interest in the Holy See's Higher Education system and its QA Agency, i.e. AVEPRO, expressed by bodies and Institutions around the world (not only in Academia).

In conclusion, the Agency's future challenges should be viewed in the light of what AVEPRO has been seeking to do since its establishment: to support Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions' efforts in the formation of leaders and professionals with whom to work together in the service of the Good of the Universal Church.