

Vatican City, June 12, 2009

Circular Letter No. 7

To Grand Chancellors
to Rectors and Deans
of Ecclesiastical Faculties
and, for information,
to Rectors of Catholic Universities
and Presidents of Bishops' Conferences

The present Circular Letter is meant to provide information on the evaluation and promotion of quality in ecclesiastical academic institutions. In this context, it is necessary first of all to inform on what has been done since the Holy See entered the "Bologna Process", in particular with the creation and first activities of the Quality Assurance Agency AVEPRO, and on what further steps will be expected from ecclesiastical institutions.

1. AVEPRO

Since the commitment to the "Bologna Process", which took place on 19 September 2003, the Holy See, through the Congregation for Catholic Education, has been actively involved in all the initiatives of the Process and its developments through the Commission set up to this aim by the Congregation. The Holy See has always been represented through the Congregation at the meetings of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), the main body working at the procedures of implementation of the decisions made at European level. Indications in that field are regularly provided by the Congregation to the ecclesiastical academic institutions present in Europe, among which those procedures related with Quality Assurance¹. The concern for quality in higher education, already mentioned in the Bologna Declaration², has acquired a growing importance in the "Bologna Process", as reflected in the communiqués issued at the six successive Ministerial Summits³.

In 2007, the Holy See, on the initiative of the Congregation for Catholic Education and following the agreements made with the other countries involved in the Bologna Process, established its own Agency, called AVEPRO (Holy See Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties). It was established by His Holiness Benedict XVI through a document signed by him on 19 September 2007 as an institution connected⁴ to the

¹ European Ecclesiastical Universities, Faculties and Institutes have been informed by Circular Letters No. 2 and 3 from the Congregation for Catholic Education on the ECTS, the Diploma Supplement and the quality assurance procedures to be implemented.

² Quality Assurance is the fifth objective mentioned in the Bologna Declaration (1999): "Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies".

³ Bologna (1999), Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), Leuven (2009).

⁴ Other institutions connected with the Holy See are, for example, the Vatican Apostolic Library, the Vatican Secret Archive, the Vatican Radio, etc.

Holy See under Art. 186 and 190-191 of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* (AAS 1988, 910-911). Its Statutes were approved in the same Pontifical document (see Annex A).

The Agency is currently presided over by Fr Franco Imoda S.J. and is composed of the Board of Directors, the Scientific Committee, the Director and staff. Moreover, it has been assisted in the development of its activities and processes since the beginning by international experts in university quality assurance and strategic planning.

2. Role of the Agency

AVEPRO is intended to accompany and guide the efforts of each institution, so that the indications that the Holy See expresses in its founding documents – in particular in the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana* (April 15, 1979) – and the dispositions coming from the Congregation for Catholic Education may be implemented for the good of the Church and for the service that the latter intends to offer. The Agency aims at promoting a culture of quality already traditionally present, assessing the quality standards and procedures used by academic institutions, even in relation with international standards, and providing the tools and assistance necessary.

Quality in ecclesiastical academic institutions is defined primarily in relation to the aims of the institutions themselves. These aims are defined by the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana*, by the Statutes of the Universities and Faculties, approved by the Congregation for Catholic Education, and by their strategic plans.

As is made clear in the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana*⁵, and also in the general framework of the “Bologna Process”, the institution itself is the structure immediately responsible for the promotion of quality through the evaluation of its own institutional and formative standards⁶. The internal quality committee⁷ has the function of coordinating the common effort in carrying out the self-evaluation process and assuring the level of academic activities. Initiatives in this field are aimed at quality enhancement.

3. The Agency as an operational tool

The activities that the Agency will carry out are the following:

1. in collaboration with academic institutions, definition, development and updating of procedures for internal and external evaluation of quality, with particular regard to requirements both ecclesiastical and civil, legal and operational at international, national and regional level;
2. drafting and publication of guidelines on evaluation both for institutions and visiting teams;
3. planning the schedule of external evaluations for all academic institutions;
4. carrying out these evaluations through peer reviews;
5. selecting and preparing peers for visits;
6. following the drafting of final reports at the conclusion of the visits;
7. collection and follow up of the recommendations for improvement resulting from external evaluations;
8. facilitating the circulation of information in the academic field, including the creation of a database;

⁵ Cf. Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana*, Art. 11.

⁶ See also: ENQA, “European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions”, in [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#), 2005, pp.16-19, 2.3. NB: This central text of ENQA is not presented as prescriptive but as a source of assistance and guidance to both higher education institutions and agencies.

⁷ See Circular Letter No. 3.

The Agency is structured and operates within the system of ecclesiastic studies with an international dimension. It may have more regional branches to respond to the particular needs and requirements of different countries or regions. It is for the Secretary of State to establish such regional branches.

4. Relationship between the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Agency

AVEPRO works in full autonomy, as stated in Art. 2 of its Statute and as is also suggested from the standards of the EHEA (European Higher Education Area)⁸. AVEPRO is currently an associate of ENQA (*European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*) and could become a full member in future.

It is clear, however, that the Agency works in close harmony with the Congregation. A representative of the Congregation is a member by right of the Board of Directors, and one is present as an observer in the Scientific Council of the Agency.

Each year the President of the Agency sends a summary report of activities to the Secretary of State – Section for Relations with States – and to the Congregation. Every five years, the Agency carries out a self-evaluation of its own activities under the supervision of the Congregation for Catholic Education.

The Congregation is consulted in the approval of Rules and the appointment of experts for peer reviews of institutions. Once the reports of external evaluation by peer review groups have been completed, they are sent by AVEPRO to the Congregation.

Accreditation, on the basis of the information gathered as well as through the evaluation process, continues to be the responsibility of the Congregation, as well as any administrative decisions related to institutions established by the Holy See. The Congregation reserves to itself the right to take remedial action, if necessary, as a result of issues identified in the institutional review report.

5. An experimental stage

Between November 2007 and January 2009, the Agency has developed a "Pilot Project", with the support and suggestions of the above mentioned international experts. Initially eight ecclesiastical Faculties took part in the Project (6 of Theology and 2 of Education Sciences), from four different countries: Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain. Each of these Faculties prepared a document based on its own internal evaluation, following the "Guidelines" provided by AVEPRO. Afterwards they received a visit from a group of experts (peer review team) who were selected by AVEPRO. The group of peers concluded their work drawing up a report detailing the results of their visit. The stage to come is that of the "follow up", in which Faculties will undertake to implement the measures for improvement suggested from the whole process.

In addition to the Guidelines for the Pilot Project, the Agency has developed two other documents: *Notes of Guidance for the Self-evaluation Report* and *Notes of Guidance for Peer Review Groups*. Those documents are being adapted according to the various contributions of the participants in the Pilot Project to form the basis for the continuation of the evaluation activities both for experts and for institutions. Additional guidelines will also be produced on specific topics.

⁸ See ENQA, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2005, p.9, 3.2 and 3.6.

6. The next stages of work

The next phases of work have been defined in agreement with the Congregation. In this new stage, the Agency will draw on the findings of the Pilot Project to set up the basis of its ordinary functioning.

As planned in the Statute, the President of the Agency has proposed the names of members for both committees, who will then be nominated in agreement with the Secretary of State.

The Committees will meet to study the strategic plan, set up operational tools and deal with the following priorities: calendar of external evaluation according to the various typologies of institutions, circulation of guidelines, setting up of adequate communication networks with the various stakeholders, an adequate structure and functioning of AVEPRO, the formalisation of relationships between AVEPRO and its possible branches and with other national quality agencies.

Institutions will soon be provided by AVEPRO with practical indications to develop their own quality systems, which should include:

1. the creation of a Quality Committee;
2. the appointment of a Chair of the Quality Committee;
3. the drafting of a comprehensive strategic plan;
4. the specification of QA instruments;
5. the compilation of the data base

The Leuven Ministerial Summit concluded a few weeks ago (April 28-29). Work focused on the drafting of a general report related with the deadline of 2010 – the date initially set as the concluding stage of the Bologna Process – but above all on the way to be followed in the coming decade (2010-2020). In the final Ministerial Communiqué⁹ the subject of academic quality is mentioned again as one of the priority objectives of the Process. At point 8 of the Communiqué in particular, the concept of quality is connected with the mission and aims of higher education, in order to bring out the diversity of institutions and systems of studies. Such a remark makes it possible for all quality assurance activities in the context of ecclesiastical studies to be closely connected with the specific nature and church mission of each single institution.

While entrusting these important orientations to the heads of ecclesiastic institutions so that they might be appropriately known and implemented, we pray you to receive our thanks for the valuable service offered and our best wishes for a good conclusion of the current academic year,

⁹ The text of the final Communiqué of the Summit can be found on the following site: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communiq e_April_2009.pdf