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E. THE ECCLESIASTICAL HIGHER EDUCATION
SYSTEM
IN THE GLOBAL WORLD

THE RATIONALE OF
AVEPRO'S EVALUATION SYSTEM





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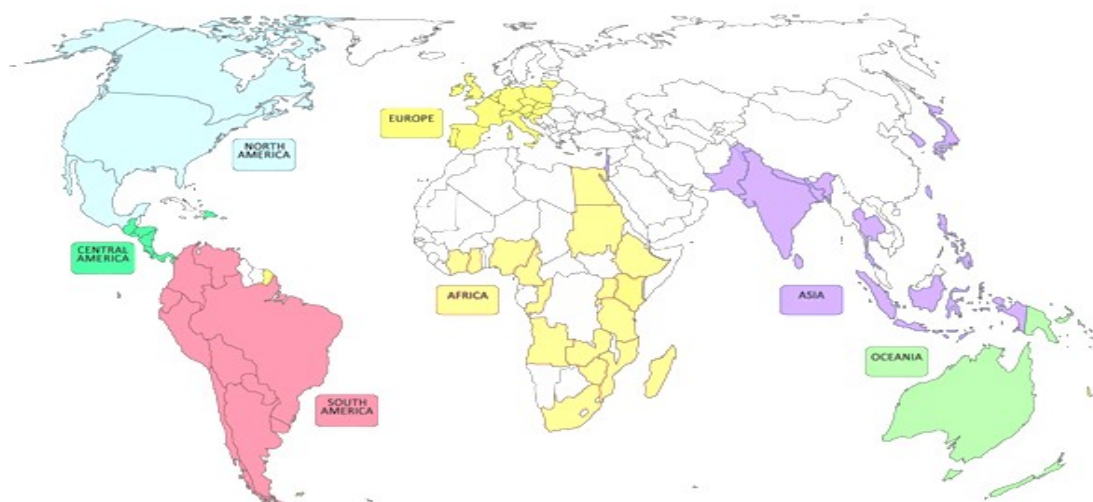
THE ECCLESIASTICAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE GLOBAL WORLD

THE RATIONALE OF AVEPRO'S EVALUATION SYSTEM

1. Introduction

This fifth part of *AVEPRO's Guidelines 2019* aims to illustrate the characteristic AVEPRO “mind frame” permeating all the procedures within the specific system of the evaluation and promotion of quality in Ecclesiastical HE Institutions. A series of points proposed here describe the framework within which AVEPRO is called upon to fulfill its mission, distinguished by the Agency's dual loyalty: to the Church's continuous efforts to communicate the joy of the Gospel, and to the varying contexts of real life in which humankind is constantly growing towards shared values and goals¹.

2. Specific and unique features of the Ecclesiastical Higher Education System



“Since the Church is called upon to testify to the truth, over the centuries she has been active in promoting Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, erected or approved by the Apostolic See, towards which, aware of her grave duty, she has given special care” (Benedict XVI, *Chirograph*, 19.09.2007)².

Testifying to the truth of the Gospel is universal by its very nature. Pope Benedict XVI's *Chirograph* founding AVEPRO therefore implies that the Ecclesiastical Higher Education System, from its very birth, comprises dialogue with every culture, embraces global, trans-national and trans-border dimensions, pursuing human promotion and emancipation with respect to creation, heading towards the Civilization of Love and universal brotherhood of one Human Family.

¹ During a meeting in Rome (30.11.2018) the Board of Directors, while approving the latest AVEPRO *Guidelines* for Evaluation and Quality Promotion, suggested that an additional part be added to the four existing parts (published on the Agency's website) in order to illustrate the specificity of the Quality Assurance that characterizes AVEPRO.

² Cf. Latin original “*Chirographum - Institutio AVEPRO conditur*”, in *Acta Benedicti PP. XVI, Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 101, 6 Ianuarii 2009/1, p. 12.



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To this end, according to the same *Chirograph* of Pope Benedict XVI, the Church “[...] has not hesitated to adhere to international initiatives and agreements concerning Higher Education, including recently the so-called *Bologna Process*, which provides for the creation of agencies designed for the evaluation and promotion of the quality of academic institutions”.

This implies due attention on the part of AVEPRO to the academic and legal standards, both global and local, according to which the various Higher Education Systems have found their distinctive identities, express their specific visions and develop their own missions for the common good of society.

Centered in Europe for historical reasons, the Ecclesiastical HE System is by its very nature a global one, distributed in various proportions across the Continents. Worldwide there are 289 Ecclesiastical Faculties, to which a number of 503 connected bodies has to be added (affiliations, aggregations and incorporations), thus making a total of 792 Institutions³.

This encompasses 28 Universities and Athenaea with 160 Faculties of Theology, 49 Faculties of Philosophy, 32 Faculties of Canon Law and 40 Faculties of other disciplines. These are spread in different ways across the Continents.

In Africa there are 15 Faculties (with 76 connected Institutions). Asia has 25 Faculties (and 56 connected institutions). In North America there are 19 Faculties (with 25 connected Institutions), while South America has 22 Faculties (and 56 connected Institutions). In Oceania there is 1 Faculty (with 3 connected institutions).

Europe, instead, has 207 Faculties (with 287 connected Institutions). Unsurprisingly, there is a particularly high concentration of Faculties in Rome (57), to which must be added numerous Higher Institutes of Religious Sciences (i.e. 47 in Italy and 30 in Spain).

3. QA in the Ecclesiastical HE System – the *Added Value*

Universities, like all Institutions, are not an end unto themselves. They are at the service of society: students, families, peoples and the whole of humankind. Catholic and Ecclesiastical Universities, likewise, are also at the service of the Church.

This understanding is reflected in numerous statements of Pope Francis’, many of which are contained in his Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium* (8.12.2017), where he advocates imparting to ecclesiastical studies “that wise and courageous renewal demanded by the missionary transformation of a Church that «goes forth»” (Foreword, 3).

This is to be done in the context of a vital threefold polarity: between the particular and the universal, between the one and the many, between the simple and the complex. A set of four major criteria help Ecclesiastical Academic Institutions cultivate knowledge that can genuinely contribute to real social transformation (contemplative contact with the heart of the Gospel; limitless dialogue; inter- and trans-disciplinarity; and networking with other academic centres in order to find appropriate solutions or paradigms of transformation).

Addressing the members of the Foundation “*Gravissimum educationis*” (25.06.2018), Pope Francis added three further criteria, favouring innovation and effectiveness: identity, quality and the common good.

³ Data reported during the presentation of *Veritatis Gaudium* by the Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, Archbishop Angelo V. Zani, on 29.01.2018, published on www.educatio.va.



4. Starting from Reality: Common objections to evaluation to be dealt with

1. “It is impossible to definitively affirm that an action taken is certainly wrong”⁴.
2. “We are capable of evaluating ourselves alone”.
3. “Who has the competence to evaluate us?”.
4. “There are no reliable parameters for our evaluation (e.g. Humanities Faculties)”.
5. “We risk being submerged by bureaucracy if we agree to evaluation”.
6. “Self-evaluation and external evaluation take time away from teaching and research”.
7. “Evaluation is costly/conflictual/subjective”.
8. “Our Institution (Faculty, programme) is so special that it cannot be really evaluated by persons who are not a part of it”.

5. Why evaluate?

1. Universities have autonomy, which implies being responsible for decisions, ensuring commitment, and the transparency of results.
2. In a nutshell, universities need to respond to cultural and social demands and to the world of work, which are constantly evolving, with a view to developing the society of the future, defining its needs and shaping its values.
3. Universities must be responsible for young people’s education or, in other words, for shaping their future.
4. Universities should, through mission statements, strategic plans and other authoritative declarations, define their objectives and profiles as well as the means and policies through which they intend to realize them. Quality development and assessment should relate to the objectives and stated aspirations of the Institution.
5. Universities must avoid all self-referentiality (like the idea that no-one can judge them, or that universities are kind of “private gardens” that must remain secret).
6. All components of society require universities to commit to a continuous journey towards ever higher quality, and to monitor quality through both self-evaluation and assessment by external evaluators.
7. This is why evaluation must constitute an integral part of universities’ institutional policies and endeavours, and of the activities of the individual academic community members.
8. It is therefore clear that evaluation cannot be constituted of episodes, but must be a continuous process.
9. The culture of quality in Ecclesiastical Institutions must involve the pursuit of the social dimension of evangelization (*Evangelii gaudium*, chap. 4), i.e. the interconnected relations for global solidarity that flow from the mystery of the Trinity (*Laudato si’*, 240): dialogue as a form of encounter between all cultures (*Evangelii gaudium*, 239). Truth, in fact, is *lógos* which creates *dia-lógos*, and hence communication and communion, also with those of other religious or humanistic convictions and with scholars of other disciplines, whether these are believers or not (*Veritatis gaudium*, Foreword, 4b).

6. What to evaluate?

⁴ “Errors don’t happen, and even when once in a while an error does happen, as in your case, who can say finally that it’s an error?”, F. Kafka, *The Castle*, 1929.



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1. To set objectives, Higher Education Institutions need to analyze what they are doing and how, in relation to both the institutional tasks of teaching and research and administrative functions. This serves first and foremost in order for them to know themselves, and thus render everyone responsible for commitments and objectives, harmonizing decision-making processes and ensuring full transparency in relation to students and all those who look to universities as a source of education and research.
2. Shared objectives, and the processes through which to achieve them, are established in the Strategic Plan, which is of *utmost importance from the point of view of clarity and transparency*.
3. From the above standpoint, the Strategic Plan provides an opportunity to review the academic curricula proposed by the system of ecclesiastical studies, in their theological foundations and at their various disciplinary levels, with the aim of inter-disciplinarity and cross-disciplinarity, reaffirming the unity of knowledge and respect for its multiple expressions, and ensuring cohesion together with flexibility, as a synthesis of the fragmented panorama of contemporary university studies. Therefore, not only inter-disciplinarity as multi-disciplinarity, but also cross-disciplinarity, setting and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the Light and Life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God's Revelation (*Veritatis gaudium*, Foreword, 4c). Those who are educated in Ecclesiastical Institutions will therefore know just where they and their academic baggage stand. They have come to it, as it were, from a height; they have taken a survey of all knowledge (cfr. John H. Newman, *The Idea of University*, 1852, Discourse VII, 7).
4. Thus, scholarship regains a unity of content, perspective and aim, in harmony with holiness (*Veritatis gaudium*, Foreword, 4c). The apostolic constitution *Sapientia Christiana* introduces research as a fundamental duty, to communicate the doctrine to men and women of our time working in various other fields of knowledge (Foreword, III), developing paradigms of action and thought to serve the Gospel in a way characterized by ethical and religious pluralism and capable of reaching into the depths of different cultural systems. Such paradigms can only derive from research within theological studies and related sciences, which seeks to ensure that the Gospel is heard by everyone (*Evangelii gaudium*, 45).
5. The objectives of Strategic Plans should therefore include the creation of new and qualified centres of research where scholars from different religious universities and from different scientific fields can interact (*Veritatis gaudium*, Foreword, 5).
6. In this light, the concept of quality appears clearer: it combines the standards for learning, teaching and research in the respective academic disciplines with the successful fulfillment of the broader societal mission of universities and, for Catholic and Ecclesiastical Universities, their mission in the Church.

7. How to evaluate

1. To achieve quality, academic Institutions must set appropriate objectives and attain them with the resources available, while accepting help to adjust their course and adapt processes, and seeking to fulfil stakeholders' needs and expectations.
2. University outputs are numerous and mostly immaterial, and thus often difficult to evaluate from a quantitative or economic viewpoint, or to compare against measurable parameters.
3. The above facilitates the de-bureaucratization of evaluation and its acquisition of value, with a public and an internal function.
4. Quality development and assessment are exercises in which everyone participates: each in their own role, and each striving for the quality of processes and results,



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because all believe in quality. This is the meaning of what we call a “culture of quality”, which arises when evaluation is not imposed or understood as a merely technical burden. Instead, it is implicit in the membership of a university community that continuously seeks improvement in every action and at all times, while not denying its weaknesses and the risks that may be encountered, but rather analyzing them in order to reduce or annul them, as well as to further develop its strengths and take advantage of opportunities.

5. In short, we are faced with a great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge, which, also for Ecclesiastical Institutions, implies processes of change towards a far-sighted prospective configuration for ecclesiastical studies. This is another fundamental reason why all members of academic communities should immerse themselves, without hesitation, in the culture of quality.
6. Putting autonomy into practice implies universities continuously striving for quality of their own accord, via stimuli, support, encouragement to change for the better and the promotion of quality in order to continuously improve it. This means improving the ability to define aims and plan to achieve them, monitoring the coherence between objectives and results.
7. It should be borne in mind that universities represent particular communities, based on knowledge formed by all members of the academic community, all of whom are actors in the processes: first in the setting of common objectives through discussion, proposals and decisions, and then by establishing together the stages for monitoring the efficacy and efficiency of all activities.

8. Permanent attitude of Quality Assurance

Ecclesiastical Higher Education Institutions are primarily evaluated not on the basis of merit or control (i.e. comparison with established standards, or *accreditation*), nor via the measurement of activities in order to justify them.

They are rather assessed on the basis of participation and of analysis aimed at understanding whether and how change can be introduced to improve quality. The provision and publication of useful information regarding the social role of the Institution, played by means of its best academic outcome, is also an important part of the process.

In this sense, the Ecclesiastical HE Institutions need to adopt a permanent attitude of conscientious Quality Assurance, improving the outcomes of their academic missions through careful and strategic reasoning and acting.