AVEPRO

Regional branches
- 2010 -

AVEPRO

Background

AVEPRO was established in 2007 by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. The immediate aim of the Agency is to work in harmony with the Ecclesiastical Faculties and Universities across Europe, in accordance with the framework established by the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana* (April 15, 1979), to develop a robust process of internal and external quality assurance that satisfies the requirements of the Bologna Process and meets the *European Standards and Guidelines* (ESG). In the longer term, and in keeping with the overall thrust of Bologna, AVEPRO's goal will be to facilitate the ecclesiastical institutions in developing a culture of quality in all their activities, including teaching, research and services.

AVEPRO is aware of the complexity of the challenge it faces:

1. The Agency must assist ecclesiastical institutions in Europe to position themselves in this new higher education landscape by developing an effective and coherent QA process, one that emphasizes continuous improvement, fosters a quality culture in all activities, and satisfies the European standards and guidelines.

2. There are about 100 ecclesiastical institutions spread across 18 countries with 15 different languages. They vary widely in size, organization, specific mission, cultural background and national context. From a structural point of view, they can be divided into four main groups:
- Pontifical Universities
- Autonomous Institutions with one or more faculties
- Institutions with one or more faculties within Catholic Universities
- Institutions with one or more faculties within State Universities.

Many of these are associated with, and responsible for the degrees and quality standards of a large number of Institutes and Study Centres (affiliated, aggregated or incorporated).

3. In common with other agencies AVEPRO is likely to find in some cases a low level of understanding of modern QA processes, limited QA competencies, and no tradition of strategic planning or awareness of the connection between strategic planning and QA.

4. The level of autonomy enjoyed by the ecclesiastical institutions, and their freedom to make independent academic decisions, are often quite limited since they may come under several jurisdictions simultaneously, for example the Congregation for Catholic Education, local Bishops, the religious order that they belong to, regional and national education authorities.

5. Many institutions are required to satisfy regional or national accreditation criteria involving detailed reporting and review. This can create a mindset that mistakenly identifies accreditation with modern international quality assurance.

6. Centralised basic data on the ecclesiastical institutions is lacking, e.g. number, age-profile and research activity of teaching staff; number of students, graduation and failure rates, trends over recent years; planning policies, etc. It is expected that website and the database, that are currently under construction, will go someway to remedying this situation.

Regional Components

Given the complexity of the challenges facing AVEPRO the Statute allows for the creation of regional components across Europe. Article 4.1 states that AVEPRO "can be articulated into more regional subcomponents in order to meet particular necessities or requests from various countries or geographical areas".

Recent discussions have favoured six such components along geographic and linguistic lines as follows:

- South Europe, comprising Italy, Malta, Italian-speaking Switzerland;
- Centre Europe, comprising Germany, Austria, German-speaking Switzerland;
- East Europe, comprising Poland, Lithuania, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia;
- Mediterranean Europe, comprising Spain and Portugal;
- Francophone Europe, comprising France and French-speaking Belgium and Switzerland;
- Northwest Europe, comprising Ireland, Holland and Dutch-speaking Belgium.

Below is a summary of number of Faculties in each region

Countries	*Number of Faculties*
ITALY, Malta, Switzerland- Italian area	64
SPAIN, Portugal	20
GERMANY, Austria, Switzerland – German area	36
FRANCE, Belgium – France area, Switzerland – French area	19
POLAND, East Europe Countries	36
Ireland, Netherlands, Belgium – Flemish area	6
Faculties total number	**181**

Regional AVEPRO Centres

It is proposed that each region will have a central office which will work closely with the President and Director of AVEPRO. The head of this office should be a respected academic with enthusiasm for furthering the aims and objectives of AVEPRO. He should be thoroughly acquainted with the local educational environment and legal requirements. He should be an integral part of the AVEPRO team, working closely with the Rome Executive and the Scientific Committee, with input into policy-making, especially as it affects his region. Ideally the head should have a title within AVEPRO that reflects the importance of his role. The heads should meet as a group with the Executive in Rome from time to time to share information, report on progress, etc. What must be avoided at all costs is a situation where the regional office becomes a mini agency of its own, developing procedures and systems independently of AVEPRO. The back-up required to support the head of the local organisation will depend on a variety of factors, such as the number of institutions in the region and their size.

Role of the Regional Office

1. The regional office will play a key role in helping to establish and maintain first class internal quality assurance systems in the region's ecclesiastical institutions. Each institution is of course responsible for its own internal quality assurance and must have the basic infrastructure to maintain the system as outlined in "Guidelines for Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties." However it will be necessary for the regional office in collaboration with AVEPRO to undertake an extensive training program covering not only the details of the internal quality assurance process but also the well accepted standard approaches to the management of modern higher education institutions: seminars and workshops on key developments with guidance notes and skill training; a model strategic planning framework incorporating QA; data bases and other instruments for the use of the institutions, with scope for local contextualization. In addition mobility arrangements and the accumulation of credits for part-time study and continuing education should be facilitated, exploiting the potential of ECTS.

2. The regional office must be pro-active in confronting the mindset that confuses AVEPRO's improvement oriented quality assurance process with the accreditation procedures common in many countries, procedures that involve detailed reporting and review and the achievement of minimal standards. It is important that care should be taken to undo any misunderstandings that exist in this regard, while at the same time avoiding 'review fatigue' through needless overlap of several processes. Thus AVEPRO's quality initiatives should be harmonized as far as possible with these local requirements. However the central thrust and integrity of AVEPRO's quality process must be maintained, with no compromise on the key objectives. The regional centers will play a crucial role in bringing this message to the ecclesiastical institutions as well as in the constructive dialogue between AVEPRO and accreditation agencies necessary to develop harmonization.

3. The document "External Review: Format of Institutional Self Evaluation Report (ISER)" sets out AVEPRO's procedures for external evaluation as required by the European Standards and Guidelines.

It would not be feasible or indeed appropriate to apply the full generic procedures of external evaluation to these smaller institutions. The regional and Rome offices should therefore collaborate in developing a lightweight process for small institutions appropriate to local circumstances. It will be the responsibility of the Rome office to organize and manage the external evaluation of the large institutions following the procedures set out in the above document.