



AVEPRO

BRIEFING NOTE
FOR ECCLESIASTICAL UNIVERSITIES AND
FACULTIES

THE NATURE, CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF
QUALITY ASSURANCE



1. Introduction

The Holy See's Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO) was established on September 19, 2007 by His Holiness Benedict XVI. It started as an initiative of the Congregation for Catholic Education after the Holy See entered the Bologna Process in 2003 and is intended to reinforce the concern with quality through the implementation of new instruments and procedures, well adapted to present day requirements and the need to move toward unified standards of which the Bologna Process is the European embodiment and actor.

Thus AVEPRO's immediate aim is to work in close 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 quality assurance that satisfies the requirements of the Bologna Process and meets the *European Standards and Guidelines* (ESG). These standards and guidelines were accepted by the European Ministers of Education in 2005, and developed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Universities Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the European Students' Union (ESU, formerly ESIB). In addition, higher education globally is conscious of the need to assure the quality of institutional, academic and educational activities. AVEPRO is thus ensuring that the institutions in its orbit are benchmarked against international standards generally while applying *Sapientia christiana* in the light of changing external circumstances.

As a first step in achieving this aim AVEPRO ran a pilot project in internal quality assurance and quality improvement in 2008, beginning in January and ending in December. For maximum initial impact two ecclesiastical faculties, covering a variety of institutional types, were chosen in each of Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain to participate in the project. Guidelines were prepared, based on best practice as developed by the EUA and the Irish universities over recent years, to facilitate and guide the institutions in establishing appropriate procedures. They spelled out in detail the various steps in the evaluation and review process and the way in which these steps are organised and managed: the preparation of a self-evaluation report by the faculty, the site visit and report by a team of peers, the follow-up and implementation of recommendations for improvements via an action plan. With the completion of the pilot project AVEPRO has used the experience gained to amend the Guidelines and to formulate a coherent overarching plan for the implementation of internal quality assurance systems in ecclesiastical institutions across Europe. In addition AVEPRO will provide detailed Notes of Guidance for the implementation of each stage of the process.

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. This is a task that will require close collaboration between the Agency and the 180 faculties (inserted in more than 100 institutions) scattered across 18 countries. It will be necessary for AVEPRO to undertake an extensive training programme covering the by now well accepted standard approaches to the management of modern higher education institutions: 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 AVEPRO could facilitate mobility arrangements, and the accumulation of credits for part-time study and continuing education, exploiting the potential of ECTS.

2. Context and Environment

Quality assurance in universities did not begin with the Bologna Process. It has a long and established pedigree in mature higher education systems. Quality and the pursuit of excellence are embedded in the tradition of higher education, which has a long history of continuous development, adaptation and improvement. Universities have always had implicit quality assurance of the effectiveness of their degree programmes, and their research activity, through a variety of instruments, including:

- Peer-review system of research publication
- Peer-review system of assessing applications for research grants
- Invitations to academic staff to teach and carry out research abroad
- Involvement of staff as peer reviewers and extern examiners internationally
- Feedback related to the employability of graduates and their progression to prestigious international post-graduate programmes
- External membership of selection groups for academic appointments
- Regular evaluations of teaching and the learning experience.

The contemporary emergence of formalised quality improvement and quality assurance systems is another stage in this evolution. The Bologna Process began with the Bologna Declaration by European Ministers of Education in 1999 that contained a commitment to the “promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.” By 2007 there were 46 signatory states, including the Holy See, working toward this goal. The aim of the process is to establish a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 in which students and staff can move freely with recognition of their qualifications, and which will support European economic, technological, social and cultural development. The introduction and development of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and Diploma Supplement (DS) have greatly contributed to the promotion of this goal by facilitating the movement of students across the continent. However there is much more to quality assurance than enhancing the mobility of students. It is also about the recognition of the quality of degrees by state agencies, employers and students, and this is felt to be particularly important in the case of ecclesiastical and pontifical institutions, especially since many of their students obtain employment in civil society.

Thus quality assurance is one of the main action items of the Bologna Process and central to the development of the European Higher Education Area. In the Berlin and subsequent Communiqués the Ministers reiterated their commitment to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level, and stressed that the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with each institution.

The European University Association, a representative group of almost eight hundred universities and rectors’ conferences, has been a central influence in the development of the Bologna Process,



especially in the area of quality assurance. The EUA proposes a coherent QA policy for Europe based on the belief that universities are responsible for developing internal quality cultures: with the active contribution of students, universities must monitor and evaluate all their activities, including academic programmes, organization and amount of research, innovativeness, management, funding systems and services. The procedures must promote academic and organisational quality, develop internal quality cultures, minimise bureaucracy, be cost-effective, and avoid over regulation. External quality assurance procedures should focus on checking, through institutional audit, that internal monitoring and QA processes have been successful and effectively done.

Two recent initiatives of particular importance to a new agency like AVEPRO are the establishment of a European register of external quality assurance agencies, and the publication by ENQA of *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Meeting these standards and guidelines in internal and external quality processes, membership of ENQA, and inclusion in the register of agencies are crucial signposts for the development of AVEPRO in the coming years.

AVEPRO is aware of the complexity of the challenge it faces. 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 emphasises continuous improvement, fosters a quality culture in all activities, and satisfies the European standards and guidelines.

The complexity does not end there. The institutions are 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).

In common with other agencies AVEPRO is likely to find initially 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. Generally it may be said that ecclesiastical institutions have not universally adopted these new approaches in institutional governance and management. It follows that the AVEPRO initiative will need to encourage them to explore constructively how they may become more advanced in these areas, developing a capacity for institutional self-analysis, setting up some useful performance databases and also acquiring greater experience in the exploitation of credit systems.

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.



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. It is therefore important that care should be taken to undo such misunderstandings, 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.

3. Quality Assurance Processes

The ecclesiastical institutions vary in size, from a single faculty to full universities with four or more faculties. Whatever the unit chosen for quality evaluation, whether it is an academic department, faculty, academic programme, service department (such as the library or computing centre), or university, the basic steps in the procedures are essentially the same.

Put simply the process for Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement comes down to answering four fundamental questions. These questions also form the basis of the Institutional Evaluation Programme of the European University Association:

- What are you trying to do?
- How are you trying to do it?
- How do you know it works?
- How do you change in order to improve?

These questions lead to reflection on mission, aims, objectives and strategic priorities, on the systems and procedures in place and their suitability for fulfilling the mission, on the routine quality measures in use including feedback from students, staff, employers, and all stakeholders, on strategic planning procedures and the capacity to change and meet new challenges.

There are well known international procedures designed to provide the answers to these questions, and they are outlined below.

Effectiveness of the quality system, and the possibilities for change and enhancement, are strengthened by this essentially bottom-up approach to self-evaluation. In his book *A Guide to Self-Evaluation in Higher Education* (Oryx Press, 1995), H.R.Kells points out that “Universities act more maturely in these matters if they are treated as trusted adults...and if they are wise enough to seize the responsibility for controlling the evaluation scheme and for self-regulation”. This is in contrast to the experience in some countries where a top-down process was adopted, as J.L. Davies points out in a recent paper (‘Cultural Change in Universities in the Context of Strategic and Quality Initiatives’, *Thema*, EUA, 2002): ‘When quality assurance is initiated as a formal process, it is normally a top-down activity, fuelled by external accountability or financial reduction, requiring crisis management. Traditions of low corporate identity will create tension and defensiveness that are reflected in non-compliance with quality processes. This translates into a reluctance to admit



errors and be self-critical, information then being passed upwards in a substantially unfiltered manner.’

Finally, but most importantly, it is a primary concern that the approach to self-evaluation and review should be simple, valid, flexible, relatively easy to implement, and certainly improvement oriented.

4. Institutional Infrastructure to sustain QA arrangements

Establishing a suitable internal infrastructure in each institution is an indispensable first step in organizing a QA process. For a university, or other large multi-faculty institution, experience shows that:

- A high level institutional Quality Committee, reporting to the Senate, should be established to oversee the quality process and to set and maintain strong policy leadership
- The Chair of the committee should be either the Rector or Vice-Rector for academic affairs
- All members of the committee should have a strong enthusiasm for the quality effort
- The committee must have the unreserved and highly visible support of the head of the institution, otherwise the interest of the staff will flag and the work will not flourish
- The executive function should be carried out by a Director of Quality Assurance (DQA), and a Quality Assurance Office established in the institution with appropriate resources to support the work of the DQA
- The DQA should also be a highly regarded member of the institution’s academic community, be secretary of the Quality Committee, and thus have a strong voice in the formulation of quality policy
- The institution should develop a robust institutional database of performance across various domains: student admission and progression, research output, etc.
- These structures should ensure that QA activities are closely connected to the entity’s strategic planning procedures, crucial in developing joined up thinking.

Of course many ecclesiastical institutions are quite small in terms of number of faculties or number of students and in that case it would be unreasonable to impose such a heavy infrastructure. Common sense should dictate the appropriate scaled-down version suitable for these smaller institutions.

The role of the Quality Office will normally include:

- Providing professional support for the development of the institution’s policy in relation to quality assurance and improvement in line with good international practice
- Driving new initiatives designed to resolve issues arising repeatedly in review reports
- Promoting a sense of ownership by individual departments and units of the institution’s quality assurance and improvement systems and procedures
- Supporting departments and units in implementing internal and external quality review processes
- Publishing review reports and other relevant reports



- Working with other institutions and with AVEPRO to improve cooperation in QA activities.

5. Summary of the Process

There are two key strands to the European approach to quality assurance. The first is *internal*, based on the core principle that QA is the responsibility of the individual institution. According to the *European Standards and Guidelines* “institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality”. The European University Association’s policy is even more explicit, as has already been noted: universities are responsible for developing internal quality cultures. They must monitor and evaluate all their activities, including study programmes, research, innovativeness, competitiveness, management, funding systems and services.

The second strand is *external*, in the sense that it is organised and carried out by an external agency (in this case AVEPRO). The ESG states that “external quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes”, while the EUA notes that external procedures should focus on checking, through institutional audit, that internal monitoring and QA processes have been successful and effectively done.

Internal Quality Assurance

The process for internal quality assurance provides a critical self-evaluation and a review of all elements of the work carried out by the unit under review, and of a variety of aspects of the students’ and other users’ experience.

The components of the methodology are:

- A self-evaluation report (SER) is prepared under appropriate headings detailing the work and activities of the unit. The emphasis is on reflection, analysis and an honest critique.
- An international peer review group (PRG) reads the self-evaluation report and spends a number of days on a site visit to the unit. The review group, which is largely composed of external experts, completes a report on their findings that emphasises recommendations for improvement.
- The peer review group report is made available to relevant parties.
- There is systematic follow-up by the unit with a view to implementing the recommendations. This is monitored by the unit and the DQA.

It is important to emphasise certain crucial aspects of the process. The review is carried out by the unit itself together with a small group of colleagues from other universities and organisations. The SER will not be published. This will encourage the unit to carry out a critical, and sometimes painful, self-analysis, or better still an examination of conscience. The review is of the unit and not of individuals. When a review has been completed a report will emerge which will not identify any individual by name. Follow-up will be prompt and an action plan will be prepared and implemented.



During the self-assessment, the review, and the follow-up procedures members of the unit will at all times respect the integrity of the process and the sensitivities of colleagues. Members of all committees involved in the process should adhere to a policy on Dignity and Respect in all transactions associated with the process. It must be remembered at all times that “the University or Faculty forms (...) a community” so that “all the people in it must feel co-responsible for the common good” (*Sapientia christiana*, Art. 11) and the cohesion of the academic community.

Value of the Process

The process is valuable to the individual unit and to the institution as a whole because:

- It presents detailed information about the unit, and the collective perception of staff and students of their role not only in the institution but also in social and cultural development and where appropriate in the international community.
- It presents a succinct but comprehensive statement of the unit’s view of its strategic objectives and capacity to deliver them.
- It shows the quality systems and processes which are already in place and permits an assessment of their effectiveness.
- It provides a comprehensive self-critical analysis of the activities of the unit and provides a springboard for improvement and development.
- It helps the unit to identify and analyse the unit’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and allows it to suggest appropriate remedies where necessary.
- Through involvement of external expert peers it provides informed advice on best practice and benchmarking of performance, both nationally and internationally.
- It identifies those weaknesses, if any, in policy and procedural, organisational and other matters, which are under the direct control of the unit and which can be remedied by action, including teaching and learning, research and societal interaction.
- It identifies possible shortfalls in resources and provides an externally validated case for increased resource allocation.
- It provides a framework within which the unit can continue to work in the future towards quality improvement.
- Over time it provides detailed, externally validated, reliable information to the institution on all its activities. This helps build the institution’s database and contributes to ongoing development and strategic planning.

External Quality Assurance

In keeping with the *European Standards and Guidelines*, which state that “external quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis” (*Standards and Guidelines*, 2.4.7 Periodic Reviews, p.21) AVEPRO will organise and manage every five years an external evaluation of each ecclesiastical institution to review the success and effectiveness of the internal quality systems in place. The procedures used for the external QA process will mirror those used for the internal process, but the weight of these procedures will reflect and be proportional to the size of the institution involved:

- The institution will prepare a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) using a methodology agreed between AVEPRO and the institution.
- AVEPRO will appoint a review group consisting of international experts who will read the SER, visit the institution over a number of days, and write a report which will be published.



- The report will recognise the importance of institutional enhancement policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality, and make recommendations for improvement. The report will normally include confirmation of the validity and accuracy of the SER, affirm or not any proposed directions for the development of the institution, and will make recommendations for further action both for the institution and its governing authorities.
- The institution will prepare an action plan based on the review report, and progress in the implementation of the plan will be monitored by AVEPRO.
- Accreditation of ecclesiastical universities and faculties continues to be the responsibility of the Congregation for Catholic Education, as well as any administrative decisions related to them. The Congregation reserves to itself the right to take remedial action, if necessary, as a result of issues identified in the institutional review reports.

It is important to note here that the ESG insists that “quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: it should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged” (*Standards and Guidelines*, 2.4.6 Follow-up Procedures, p.21).

6. Agency Review

Agencies such as AVEPRO are required by the ESG to have in place procedures for their own accountability. These include:

- Internal quality assurance procedures, which include an internal feedback mechanism, i.e. means to collect feedback from its own staff and council/board
- An internal reflection mechanism, i.e. means to react to internal and external recommendations for improvement
- An external feedback mechanism, i.e. means to collect feedback from experts and reviewed institutions for future development and improvement.

The ESG also requires a cyclical external review of the Agency’s activities and processes at least once every five years. The review procedures follow the standard steps of self-evaluation and review by international experts. The results are documented in a report which states the extent to which the agency is in compliance with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies.