Opening statement on COVID-19 for ENQA General Assembly, 29 April 2020
By ENQA President, Christoph Grolimund, on behalf of the ENQA Board

Dear members, dear colleagues, dear friends

Normally ENQA's statutory events are embedded in a conference – a Members' Forum or a General Assembly – hosted by a member.

Normally we use these conferences to exchange experiences, to maintain contacts and friendships, to eat and to drink together.

Having said that, there is nothing normal about today's General Assembly!

An invisible virus has turned the world as we know it upside down, endangering the health of everyone, taking countless lives and wreaking economic disaster.

In order to respond to this extraordinary situation, I open today's statutory event with a message from the whole ENQA Board.

The pandemic, or rather the measures taken to contain it – a ban on assembly, curfew, closed borders, closed shops and restaurants, closed schools – have restricted our routines, habits and liberty as citizens in a way that for most of us is unprecedented.

COVID-19 not only affects our daily lives; COVID-19 has a massive impact on our work as quality assurance agencies.

The ENQA Board discussed how the pandemic is affecting agencies and found that the consequences are as diverse as the EHEA itself.

In the short term, practically all agencies are faced with the same questions: how do we deal with the planned procedures when experts can no longer travel, when on-site visits are no longer possible due to the risk of infection? Do we postpone or switch to video conferences?

For some of us, these are more than just organisational questions: if procedures have to be postponed, some agencies lose their fees and thus the basis of their existence.

At universities, on the other hand, central processes are being called into question: at the moment, this primarily concerns the way in which exams are organised, and the associated questions around academic integrity.

In the very near future, admission procedures will be impacted. Where tuition fees make up a large proportion of the financing of universities, COVID-19 can also threaten the financial basis of universities.

In the medium and long term, we have to assume that the pandemic will call into question the fundamental basis of our work: on-site visits were previously considered the core of external quality assurance. If COVID-19 stays with us, we will have to rethink our methodologies.

In many countries, universities have responded to the situation by digitalising teaching and education. This may create realities that call for new forms of external quality assurance.

ENQA, as a membership association, is aware that we have a task and a responsibility here.

Together with EQAR, we have agreed that postponements of procedures or implementation of site visits via video conference will not have a negative impact on ENQA membership and EQAR registration. Further information is available on the websites or ENQA and EQAR.

ENQA has launched a social media campaign across Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook encouraging agencies to share and exchange their experiences using the hashtag #QAfromHome.

Furthermore, we have decided to organise a webinar, with which we will provide leaders of agencies an opportunity to discuss strategic decision-making in response to COVID-19 and explore the needs of our members for medium and long-term development in light of the pandemic. In this way we want to create a basis for working on the innovation of external quality assurance in line with our strategy.

Since the development of external quality assurance is driven by the development of teaching and education at universities, we also want to work closely with the E4, i.e. with our partner associations of higher education institutions and students.

In the meantime, of course, all of us – Board Members and Secretariat – remain available if we can help you with specific questions.

With these words the ENQA General Assembly of spring 2020 is opened.