I'm writing to you about your application to study the Biological Sciences MSc (APST17) programme in the Department of Animal and Plant Sciences at the University of Sheffield. As you know, the University will be adjusting how it delivers its courses in the autumn to accommodate the social distancing measures required to combat the coronavirus pandemic. The current plans involve a blend of face-to-face teaching in small groups in Sheffield, where social distancing can be maintained, supported by digital delivery. In this email, I'll explain what this will mean for your studies on the MSc Biological Sciences course.

**Course content**

There's no change to the overall learning outcomes of the course. You'll still obtain proficiency in planning, conducting, and critically interpreting biological research, an advanced understanding across biological sciences or in the specialised pathway that you select, and a wide range of transferable skills. However, to accommodate the new protocols for the 2020-21 academic year, we have made some adjustments to the content and structure of your MSc.

We will continue to offer all modules that are listed on the course website, but we have moved Field Biology from the beginning of Semester 1 to the Easter vacation during Semester 2, when we hope social distancing restrictions will have been relaxed and we'll be able to run the field trip in a similar way to previous years. This will also lighten the workload during the shorter Semester 1.

Please rest assured that there will still be a full selection of modules for you to choose from, and you can still select any of our pathways (Biological Sciences, Evolutionary Biology, Biodiversity and Conservation, or Plant and Crop Sciences). You'll still acquire the advanced knowledge, understanding and academic skills appropriate for a masters level degree.

**Teaching**

The majority of our teaching comprises lectures, seminars and practicals, and we'll still be using these formats in 2020-21. Teaching will be spread across the usual three semesters (including the summer research project), but the first semester will be shortened to eight weeks with the revised start date for masters courses of Monday 26 October.

It's not possible to social distance in a crowded lecture theatre, so we'll be delivering all our lectures online. Lectures are primarily presentations by one of our subject experts, and online delivery suits the format well. We've made recorded lectures available online for several years, but in 2020-21 we will be recording these especially with online learning in mind, including a mix of short and long recorded lectures available on demand which will be supplemented by additional online resources.

For our interactive classes, eg, small group discussions and skills sessions, we'll be using a combination of face-to-face and digital teaching, and you'll have regular, timetabled sessions of each form. The face-to-face sessions will take place in small groups, so that we can use
our larger teaching rooms and still maintain social distancing. Our face-to-face teaching has always taken place across the University's campus, and this won't change in 2020-21. The digital sessions will be live and fully interactive, for example group video calls.

For your Literature Review, you will work individually with an academic supervisor, and will meet one-to-one with them. As noted above, the Field Biology has been moved to Spring. We anticipate being able to deliver this as normal, including field visits to a range of sites in and around the Peak District National Park. Your research project will run June-August 2021, and we expect by that point to be able to offer a full range of field, laboratory, and computer-based projects.

Our academic staff will be available as usual for tutorials and other one-to-one meetings, and will still hold their regular office hours. It may not be possible for these sessions to take place in person, but if not you'll be able to make an audio or video call.

Learning resources

Most of our learning resources are already available online, and module leads will ensure that all core reading is available via our online learning environment. Our physical libraries will be open as soon as it's safe to do so, and our librarians are committed to providing as full a service as possible, taking into account social distancing requirements and all the latest government advice.

Assessment

The majority of assessment at masters level is via a range of coursework assignments. These are already completed electronically, and submitted and marked online. Some modules do include exams, but these are also already delivered online, and you can complete your answers electronically at home, and you'd be able to consult your books and notes.

Costs

The tuition fee for the course will stay the same, and we don't expect students will incur additional costs as a result of the changes we're making. You'll be able to participate in all the online activities using a regular laptop connected to the internet, although you will need a microphone and camera to contribute fully in virtual discussions.

Further information

I hope this email has given you an idea of what to expect when you join us in the autumn. As you'll be aware, this pandemic is a fast-moving and unpredictable phenomenon, and we might need to make further changes as the situation develops and the University responds
to updates in public health guidance. Please be assured that we'll be approaching the next year as a single departmental family of staff and students together, and we're committed to ensuring that you're supported, and that you still receive a world-class university education here at Sheffield.

If you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch with our Director of Postgraduate Teaching, Dr Tom Webb at aps-pgt-applicants@sheffield.ac.uk. Please keep looking out for emails from the University and checking our frequently asked questions, which are updated regularly with all the latest developments. We also have some on demand content from our recent online open day which you might find useful.

I hope you enjoy what's left of the summer, and stay safe.

Best wishes

Professor Rob Freckleton and Dr Tom Webb
Head of Department and Director of Postgraduate Teaching