I'm writing to you about your application to study the MSc Drug Discovery Science (CHMT17) programme in the Department of Chemistry 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 in chemistry.

Course content

There are no changes to the overall learning outcomes of the course. Although we have to accommodate new protocols for the 2020-21 academic year, all the modules you will study remain the same. Please rest assured that the essential character of the programme will be unchanged and you will still acquire the knowledge, understanding and skills you will need. However, there is one optional module, New Drug Discovery and Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Regulations, which regrettably cannot be run this year.

Teaching

The majority of our teaching comprises lectures, workshops, practicals and research work, and we will still be using these formats in 2020-21. Teaching will be spread across the usual two semesters and will start the week commencing Monday 26 October.

It is not possible to social distance in a crowded lecture theatre, so we will be delivering much of our material online. Staff will provide recorded lectures for students to follow, take notes and digest in their own time, with the guidance of a schedule provided by the lecturer. These will be supported in a variety of ways, eg, written material, online quizzes, further reading, exercises, as best suited to supporting you in your learning for that module.

Lecture material will be supported by workshops. It is expected that these will mostly be delivered via a live video link where you will be encouraged to take an active role in developing your understanding of the chemistry with the help of the lecturer.

Our academic staff will be available as usual to answer questions and talk to you about your studies. It may not be possible for all these sessions to take place in person, but if not you will be able to make an audio or video call.

One of the strengths of this programme is that it draws on different disciplines in multiple university departments. You should be aware that the exact balance of teaching methods may vary between departments, but we will be very careful to make sure that the structure of each module is made clear to you.

You will receive lab training, integrated into specific modules, allowing you to develop the essential practical skills required in this discipline.

Research projects

An irreplaceable part of any masters programme is the opportunity to develop research skills, and we are committed to providing an individual research project for each of the students on this programme. Each project will focus on one or more aspects of drug discovery including computer-aided drug design, bioinformatics, chemical library/drug synthesis, natural product lead discovery, biophysical, biochemical,
cellular or whole organism assay development. Current restrictions would mean that students can have access to research labs to do practical research on a carefully timetabled basis, barring changes to the advice on social distancing. Plans are in place to deliver the same learning outcomes by other means if needed.

Learning resources

Most of our learning resources are already available online. 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.

All the software that you might require is either free or a license is provided by the Department/University.

Assessment

Lectured modules are assessed by a combination of exam and coursework. At the end of each semester we would usually hold formal invigilated exams. It is not going to be possible to run these exams at the end of Semester 1 and they will be replaced with an open book online format. This means that you will not need to come to an examination hall but you will be asked to address an exam question (or questions) over a limited period of time (eg, 24 hours) and you will be able to refer to your notes, lecture materials etc. in the development of your answers. Most coursework assignments will be completed electronically, and submitted and marked online.

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 or desktop computer connected to the internet, although you may need a microphone and camera to contribute fully in virtual discussions.

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 us at chemistry-admissions@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.

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

Best wishes
Professor Graham Leggett
Head of Department
Department of Chemistry