I'm writing to you about your application to study the Molecular Biology and Biotechnology MSc (MBBT12) degree programme in the Department of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology 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 Molecular Biology and Biotechnology MSc degree programme.

Course content

There's no change to the overall learning outcomes of the course. You'll still obtain proficiency in experimental science and an advanced understanding of molecular biology, plus 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 structure of your training.

There will still be optional modules and we will still be running practical training classes, although in smaller group sizes which ensure appropriate social distancing and also improve supervision, and with the cleaning between sessions and enhanced use of the protective equipment that one often employs in science laboratories. The focus will be on attaining the key experimental skills in the laboratories, whilst preliminary background information including the use of specially prepared techniques videos and any subsequent data analysis will be done separately online. You will thus build up the expected set of practical skills and plans have been made for you to undertake a project in the spring semester.

Please rest assured that you'll still get to learn all about the application of molecular biological techniques, and you'll still acquire the knowledge, understanding and academic skills you'll need for your future career.

Teaching

As you know, some of our teaching comprises lectures, tutorials and practicals, and we'll still be using these formats in 2020-21. Teaching will be spread across the year and will start the week commencing 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'll be delivering a mixture of shorter recorded sessions and some live sessions as well, with an opportunity for students to submit comments and questions in real time.

For our interactive classes, we'll be using a combination of face-to-face and digital teaching, and you'll have regular, timetabled sessions of each form. Any face-to-face sessions will take place in small groups such as outlined above for the practical classes, so that we can use our larger teaching rooms and still maintain social distancing. The digital sessions will be live and fully interactive, for example group video calls.

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. 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

Coursework assignments are already completed electronically, and submitted and marked online.

We’re still finalising our plans for exams, but we won’t be holding formal, invigilated exams in the Semester 1 exam period in January/February. It's likely we'll use an 'open book' format instead, where exam questions are made available online and you have a certain amount of time, for example two days, to answer them. You’d complete your answers electronically at home, and you'd be able to consult your books and notes. Some other universities use open book exams as a matter of course and this move to a digital format fits with the University of Sheffield's sustainability agenda. We’ll confirm the arrangements for Semester 1 exams in the individual module handbooks you’ll receive when you join us.

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 tablet connected to the internet, although you will 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 our Course Director, Dr Qaiser Sheikh at mbb-pgt-apply@sheffield.ac.uk. Please also let Dr Sheikh know if you have any medical or personal circumstances that might affect how you're able to participate next year.

Further information

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

Prof Mike Williamson
Head of Department
Dept Molecular Biology & Biotechnology