I'm writing to you about your application to study the Biological Imaging MSc programme in the Department of Physics and Astronomy 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 this course.

Course content

There's no change to the overall learning outcomes of the course. You'll still cover all of the material, and you will still gain both theoretical and practical knowledge and skills in biological imaging. The interaction with our course partners will be maintained, so there will be plenty of opportunity to interact with both our academic and industrial partners through seminars, networking events, one-off events and industrial problem classes. However, there will be some changes to the course in order to accommodate the protocols and these are outlined below.

Teaching

Teaching will be spread across the usual two semesters with a start date of 26 October.

It is not possible to socially distance in a crowded lecture theatre, so we'll be delivering much of our material online. This will be a mixture of (usually 10-20) minute videos introducing you to the material with roughly three hours of videos per week in the first semester covering the core module. This will be supported by online tutorials, problem classes and one-off training sessions.

A key component of the course is to provide hands on training using the microscopy systems and we intend to keep that aspect of the course. The interactive sessions with the microscopes will involve social distancing and remote access to the machines from within our light microscopy facility, so you will be able to ‘drive’ the microscopes while being supervised by an expert. The data you collect will be uploaded to your university computing account so that data analysis and report writing can be done on computers either in the university computer labs, or at home.

In the second semester we aim to have a variety of projects available including industrial based projects, theory, data analysis and experimental laboratory-based projects. This will ensure a wide range of choice for students. The computing aspects of the course will move online with live interactive sessions, this worked very well earlier this year and allowed the students to develop their collaborative programming skills using tools such as Github.

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

Learning resources

We have a wide range of online learning resources dedicated to biological imaging and will also have one-off online sessions to add value to the course. This year these have involved one-to-one sessions working with a camera company and seminars on advanced image processing.
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 software you might require is either free or a license is provided by the department/university and will run on up-to-date windows or mac OS (and probably linux, although that is not guaranteed).

**Assessment**

Coursework assignments will be submitted and marked online. In many cases they can be written using word processing software (Word or LaTeX being the most common), but for some mathematical work it is easiest for it to be written (neatly) longhand and photographed and submitted as an image. Assessment for work done with external partners will take a variety of forms, including the submission of images and presentations. These will be assessed by both the academic and the industrial partner. The final project will be assessed through a written report and an online oral examination.

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. Most assessment will likely be through some mixture of short reports/essays, online quizzes (eg, multiple choice), or ‘open book’ exams where you have a limited time to complete the assessment (usually a few hours), but have access to your notes, textbooks, and the internet to help you. For each module the assessment methods will be chosen to best match the learning objectives of that course.

**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 might find you want a headset or separate webcam depending on your setup).

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 fast-moving and unpredictable, 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 Ashley Cadby at A.Cadby@Sheffield.ac.uk.

**Learning Support**

Please also let either Prof. David Mowbray (d.mowbray@sheffield.ac.uk) or Dr Katherine Inskip (k.inskip@sheffield.ac.uk) 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. We also have some on demand content from our PGT on-line open days, which you might find useful. International offer holders can also access the international offer holders hub.

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

Best wishes

Professor Ashley Cadby
MSc Biological Imaging course director
Department of Physics and Astronomy