I'm writing to you about your application to study the Solar Cell Technology 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 key skills and learning outcomes for the programme including the underpinning physics of solar cells, photovoltaic systems and their integration into power grids. You'll still spend time in the laboratory learning to characterise solar cell performance and you'll learn to analyse laboratory and simulation data to understand how the technology works both in theory and practice.

However, to accommodate the new protocols for the 2020-21 academic year, we have made some adjustments to the structure and timing of the programme. In the first semester there are two introductory modules that provide much of the key knowledge needed for the rest of the programme. These will be delivered largely online with support via extended tutorial sessions on a weekly basis. These tutorials will cover problem solving and computer simulation and analysis activities. Laboratory sessions will start towards the end of the first semester and progress through the second semester. Experiments will be spread out and timetabled on an individual student basis. Only data collection will be done in the laboratory. Analysis of results will be done away from the lab and practice data will be made available to ensure the best possible experience.

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 six hours of videos per week covering both your core and optional modules. These are supported by, eg, written material, online quizzes, further reading, exercises, or whatever suits that module best.

This will be supported by timetabled interactive classes for particular learning activities that most benefit from a face-to-face environment. Laboratory classes will be prioritised but other activities will include support for computing and problem solving. In order to get the most out of time spent in the laboratory we have designed practice data analysis and presentation activities.

Dissertation projects will be allocated in Semester 1 and run through to the end of the programme in September. We hope to be able to run some experimental projects but we will also provide a range of computational, analysis and review projects to ensure a wide variety of choice. Some projects may run in pairs of students and in these, lab-based work will be divided amongst the pair to comply with social distancing rules.

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

Most of our learning resources are already available online, and this includes key text books, papers and articles. 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 operating system.

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.

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 Dr Alastair Buckley or Professor David Lidzey. (alastair.buckley@sheffield.ac.uk or d.g.lidzey@sheffield.ac.uk)

Learning Support

Please also let either Professor 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

Dr Alastair Buckley
MSc Solar Cell Technology course director
Department of Physics and Astronomy