I'm writing to you about your application to the Astrophysics 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, with all of the Astrophysics MSc modules still going ahead. So, you'll still learn about the Universe, galaxies, stars, and planets, and have the opportunity to use research-grade observing facilities. You will also develop skills in computing, data analysis and science communication that make our Astrophysics MSc such good preparation a wide range of future careers, not least those in astronomy research.

At present, we expect that the field trip to La Palma element of the PHY61007 Observational Astronomy with Field Trip module will go ahead. The trip is due to take place in Summer 2021, by which time we anticipate that all travel restrictions will have been lifted. Given the circumstances, however, it is possible that the field trip may have to be cancelled if the UK Government or the University deem it too great a risk to the health and wellbeing of our students and staff. We will, of course, keep those students enrolled on that module up to date with any key developments regarding the field trip.

**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 at least one timetabled interactive class of ~50 minutes per module which will allow you to ask questions, go through derivations, have live interactive quizzes, and do whatever best suits the learning objectives of the module that week.

A number of the Astrophysics MSc modules will also be attended by students enrolled on our undergraduate programmes which have earlier start dates this year. In all such cases, however, lectures will be recorded and delivered online, so you will have access to all the same material. Extra live sessions will be provided, and you will not be expected to work harder to catch up. Where necessary, deadlines for your assessments will be pushed back to a later date in order to give you plenty of time to review the necessary material. These changes only apply to Semester 1, as the Semester 2 start date is the same for all students enrolled on our taught programmes.

While many of our students have found that online delivery can be highly effective, we still appreciate the importance of face-to-face learning. As such, we will support our online delivery with small group and one-to-one sessions where possible. To aid social distancing measures, meetings with your dissertation supervisor at the start of the year will likely take place online. This situation is, however, under constant
review, and we hope to be able to move to face-to-face meetings as soon as possible. On that note, dissertation projects will still be allocated in Semester 1 and run through to the end of the programme in September.

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.

For observing, we have two telescopes that can be operated remotely: one based in Sheffield, and the other on La Palma in the Canary Islands. Since they can be used remotely, the current situation doesn’t present any restrictions to their use, and so we anticipate that our students will be able to use them as usual during the coming academic year.

**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 me, James Mullaney, as the programme lead for the Astrophysics MSc (email: j.mullaney@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. We understand that some students may be temporarily unable to attend on campus due to international travel restrictions, visa delays, medical reasons, or a disability. We are committed to ensuring that you are not excluded or disadvantaged for this reason. You will be able to access our induction activities and all our digital learning online until you are able to join us in person.

**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 James Mullaney
MSc Astrophysics course director
Department of Physics and Astronomy