I'm writing to you about your application to study BSc Environmental Science (F900) 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.

Course content

There are no changes to the overall learning outcomes of the course. You'll still obtain an advanced understanding of environmental science, its latest research and debates as well as training in 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 content and structure of your first year.

Unfortunately, a core module - Ecological Identification Skills - will not be running this year. Instead, we have increased your choice of optional Environmental Science modules. This means you can now choose 40 credits-worth of optional modules (rather than 30 credits-worth as was the case previously).

Because of the challenges of managing module selection during the pandemic, the University has suspended ‘unrestricted’ credits for 2020-21. However, we have added a number of optional modules from other departments that you can choose. These are the modules most commonly chosen by students on your course.

- French Post A Level
- German Post A Level
- Spanish Post A Level
- Introduction to Media & Communication in Society
- Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics
- Genes in Populations
- Animal Behaviour
- Animal Physiology, Reproduction and Development
- Molecular and Cell Biology

You'll also still be able to choose a foreign language module from the Modern Languages Teaching Centre.

Please rest assured that there will still be a wide selection of modules for you to choose from and you'll still acquire the knowledge, understanding and academic skills you'll need for Levels 2 and 3.

Teaching

As you know, the majority of our teaching comprises lectures, seminars, practicals and fieldwork; we'll still be using these formats in 2020-21. Teaching will be spread across the usual two semesters and will start the week commencing Monday 28 September.

It's not possible to socially 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 this content through a mixture of live sessions and pre-recorded materials, which allows you the flexibility to engage with these materials at a time convenient to you.

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. The face-to-face sessions will take place in small groups, so that we can use our larger teaching rooms and still maintain social distancing. Our face-to-face teaching has
always taken place across the University's campus, and this won't change in 2020-21. The live digital sessions will be fully interactive, using 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, and staff are working to ensure this for the vast majority of core and optional readings for our Level 1 modules. 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.

Of course, our teaching will continue to make full use of a range of digital tools to enhance your learning - from virtual learning environments to specialist software used in research and practice - that are freely available to all our university staff and students.

Assessment

Coursework assignments are already completed electronically, and are submitted and marked online. We use a range of assessments throughout the year, which are designed to develop a range of skills and techniques.

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 2021. Instead we are replacing these exams with a number of alternative assessments, including asynchronous online exams (where exam questions are made available online for a few days, and you can chose when to sit the assessment within this time – but once you open the assessment you have a specific time-period (e.g. 1.5 hours) to complete the exam) and time-limited essays (where the essay question(s) are released online and you have a certain amount of time, for example three days, to write your essay). You'd complete these assessments 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. We'll confirm the arrangements for Semester 1 exams in the individual module handbooks you'll receive when you join us.

Accreditation

We know this is an uncertain time, so we've been in touch with the Institute of Environmental Sciences and they have confirmed that the new arrangements still meet their accreditation guidelines. This means that your degree has been independently evaluated to ensure you will still develop the knowledge, understanding, skills and approaches that the IES expects of Environmental Sciences graduates.

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. If you are concerned that you might not be able to afford equipment or have a broadband connection to study remotely, please contact the University's Financial Support Team (financialhelp@sheffield.ac.uk). The University can provide laptops on loan or a grant depending on your circumstances.
Further information

I hope this email has given you an idea of what to expect when you join us in the autumn. As you will 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 will be approaching the next year as a single departmental family of staff and students together, and we are committed to ensuring that you are fully supported, and that you still receive a world-class university education at Sheffield.

If you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch with us via geography@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. We also have some on demand content from our online applicant open days which you might find useful.

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

With good wishes,

Professor Jenny Pickerill
Head of Department
Department of Geography