I am writing to you regarding your application to study MPlan Urban Studies and Planning (K400) in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning 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 will explain what this will mean for your studies on the Urban Studies and Planning (MPlan) course.

Course content

There are no changes to the overall learning outcomes of the course. You will still obtain proficiency in urban planning, underpinned by an advanced understanding of the concepts and practices needed by professionals to plan and manage the places where we live, work and play, as well as a wide range of key transferable skills demanded of professionals working in the built environment and beyond. However, to accommodate the new protocols for the 2020-21 academic year, we have made some adjustments to the content and structure of Level 1.

All core modules offered at Level 1 on the Urban Studies and Planning (MPlan) course will run but we have taken the difficult decision not to run our usual two-day residential field trip to York as part of our Level 1 planning project and instead concentrate our attention on Sheffield, the city where you will be living and studying for the next four years.

We have also made some changes to the way that our process for choosing optional modules will operate for Level 1 students studying on the Urban Studies and Planning (MPlan) course. As part of the course, Level 1 students typically choose 20 ‘unrestricted’ credits from within the Department of Urban Studies and Planning or more broadly from across the University. Due to the challenges associated with managing module selection during the pandemic, the University has suspended unrestricted credits for 2020-21. In their place, we’ve compiled the following list of options drawn from other Urban Studies and Planning courses, and from courses offered by our colleagues in Geography, Psychology, Sociology and the Sheffield Methods Institute owing to their relevance to the Urban Studies and Planning (MPlan) course:

- Housing, Home and Neighbourhood (TRP130)
- Cities (TRP111)
- Social Psychology I (PSY1001)
- Introducing Criminology (SCS1007)
- Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics (SMI 110)
- Education, Power and Society: Introduction to the Sociology of Education (EDU104)
- Earth, Wind, Ice and Fire (GEO 113)
- Environmental Change and Society (GEO 115)

You will also still have the opportunity to choose a foreign language module should you wish to.

Please rest assured that there will still be a wide selection of modules for you to choose from, and for you to deepen your understanding of urban studies and planning at Level 1 that will set you up with the knowledge, understanding and academic skills you will need for Levels 2, 3 and 4.

We are also well aware that a big part of Undergraduate study is about building professional connections and forging lifelong friendships. We are planning a series of online and face-to-face induction activities to provide a space for you to meet your fellow students and some of the academic and professional services staff who will support you on your new adventure! Details of induction activities will be sent to you in advance of the new academic year.
Teaching

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

It is not possible to socially distance in a crowded lecture theatre, so we will be delivering all our lectures online. Lectures are primarily presentations by one of our subject experts, and online delivery suits the format well. We have made recorded lectures available online for several years, but in 2020-21 we will be delivering these live as well, with an opportunity for students to submit comments and questions in real time.

For our interactive classes, we will be using a combination of face-to-face and digital teaching, and you will 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 will not change in 2020-21. The digital sessions will be live and fully interactive, that include the use of group video calls, discussion boards, and virtual workshops and studios.

Our academic staff will be available as usual for tutorials and other one-to-one meetings, and will still hold regular office hours. It may not be possible for these sessions to take place in person, but if not you will be able to make an audio or video call.

Learning resources

Most of our learning resources are already available online, and this includes all the core reading 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.

Assessment

The majority of coursework assignments are already completed electronically, and submitted and marked online in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning.

We are still finalising our plans for exams, but we will not be holding formal, invigilated exams in the usual Semester 1 exam period in January/February. Where exams are used to assess learning on a module, It is likely we will 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 would complete your answers electronically at home, and you will be able to consult your books and notes. Some other universities use open book exams as a matter of course. We will confirm the arrangements for Semester 1 exams in the individual module outlines and Undergraduate Handbook that you will receive when you join us.

Accreditation

We have been in touch with our accrediting bodies – the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Chartered Institute of Housing – and they have confirmed that the new arrangements meet their accreditation guidelines, and that you will still be eligible for full RTPI and RICS accreditation when you graduate from the Urban Studies and Planning (MPlan) course.
Costs

The tuition fee for the course will stay the same, and we do not expect students will incur additional costs as a result of the changes we are making. You will 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 during 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'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 us via usp@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.

Best wishes,

Professor David Robinson
Head of Department
Department of Urban Studies and Planning