Vice-Chancellor's Awards recipients' strategies for giving personalised feedback

Continuing our series of profiles of the 2010 VC’s award recipients, we spoke with Associate Professor Adam Bridgeman, who together with Dr Peter Rutledge, received a Vice-Chancellor's Award for Support of the Student Experience for "Delivering High Quality and Rapid Feedback for Large Classes" (Faculty of Science).

Adam saw a strong need for improved feedback to students in first year chemistry: “I taught at Cambridge where there were two students per tutor, and the students received feedback at every tutorial. Here we have big classes and the two things that hit me when I arrived in 2006 were the lack of personal engagement with the students and the lack of feedback – the scores were just put up on a noticeboard outside the lab. I wanted to address these issues in a way that we could afford and that was effective.”

First year chemistry has roughly 2000 students per semester, spread across eight units. The students complete quizzes on scannable forms, and there are ten versions of each quiz to help deter plagiarism. Adam wrote a program to provide individualised, detailed feedback to each student on each quiz. Students receive an email with information on their marks, how they did on the hard and easy questions, detailed feedback on each question and a link to further resources.

As Adam explains, “The feedback helps the student build a picture as to why he or she got a particular answer wrong. Emails are sent within 1 to 24 hours of the students completing the quiz. I find that if you leave it a week, the students aren’t interested. The quicker the turnaround, the better for their learning.”

Students do three quizzes per semester and by the third quiz the system can detect if grades are going up or down and offer congratulations or an encouraging note to work harder. Students appreciate knowing that someone has noticed and is concerned about their progress.

Student evaluations of the system have been positive: “The USE scores showed an immediate and significant improvement, and the students made specific and positive mentions of the system. Given their feedback we really had to use the system in the second year, where the same students would be continuing on. My colleague Peter Rutledge adapted the system for second year chemistry and now has refined it so that a single administrator runs the whole process.”

The feedback system has been running for three years in first year chemistry and for two years in
second year chemistry. There has been interest from other disciplines, including biology and pharmacy. The system can be used for multiple choice quizzes in any discipline. Adam is keen for others to use the system, so please contact him for a chat. You can also find out more in the latest issue of Synergy.