The challenges facing Higher Education that place it ‘on the edge’ were the subject of the 34th Annual International Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) in the Gold Coast recently.

In his closing statement to the Conference, the outgoing President of HERDSA (Professor Geoffrey Crisp-RMIT’s new Dean of Learning and Teaching) described how the Australian Learning and Teaching Council had had such a significant impact on establishing networks of academics dedicated to improving the student experience and student outcomes.

Papers, Round Table and Showcase sessions explored the many themes as to how Higher Education might respond to these many challenges including. Among the many issues discussed were how the sector might build leadership capacity in learning and teaching.

Professor Sandra Jones presented a paper on the Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) that she and colleagues developed during an ALTC funded project (RMIT is the lead university together with Macquarie University, University of Wollongong and Australian Catholic University). She stated “it was pleasing that the ASERT was met with enthusiastic acclaim as a useful tool to identify Action to encourage a distributed leadership approach to building leadership capacity in learning and teaching.”. The ASERT approach underpins further research that has recently been awarded a further ALTC Leadership for Excellence project grant in 2011.

Professor Crisp presented a paper on redefining assessment practices in tertiary education. Professor Crisp proposed a specific type of assessment task he defined as integrated assessment; the specific purpose of these assessment tasks was to influence students’ approaches to future learning by encouraging students to articulate the strategies they used to solve problems and how they recognised quality assessment responses presented by themselves or their peers.

As part of the discourse upon the changing nature of the workforce profile in the Higher Education sector, Robyn May, a sessional lecturer in the School of Management at RMIT, presented a paper on the casualisation of university teaching. This research is part of a wider ARC project exploring gender and employment equity in Australian universities. The presenters of this project appealed to all staff to contribute to this research project via a survey that will be distributed in the near future.