

RESEARCH IS (NOT) A CORNER CASE FOR NRENS

In an earlier blogpost, I talked about how SUNET thinks about our network as a "research first" service: together with NORDUnet we produce commodity Internet as a by-product of the network we operate in order to connect researchers with each other and with (global) research infrastructure. Competing with commercial network operators to just deliver commodity Internet is a bad way to spend money. In essence SUNET has defined research and researchers as core business. This way of thinking should be a no-brainer for all NRENS.

In practice however, there are several cases where it is not at all clear that NRENS prioritize research and researchers. A notable case can be found (somewhat surprisingly) in the area of federated identity. Scalable federated identity has not only been spearheaded by the global NREN community, but is consistently one of the most highly appreciated features of the typical NREN service offering.

When our customers are asked what they like about SUNET, SWAMID is always listed along with the network as the most important service used by our customers.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that the global federation community has failed so miserably in prioritizing research services. With the launch of eduGAIN a few years ago, several large research infrastructures (eg LIGO, elixir and NIH) tried to enable their services for eduGAIN. What they found was pretty depressing:

Campus identity providers do not enable eduGAIN connectivity

Even when eduGAIN is enabled, attributes are seldom released despite technologies like REFEDS R&S and Data Protection Code of Conduct

The tenacity of the folks notably at LIGO and NIH is to be admired – despite pretty depressing results they keep speaking to the global federation operator community trying to improve this picture and even though things are improving over time, they are not improving fast enough.

Recently Chris Whalen of NIH started to share internal numbers showing which campuses are successfully (and unsuccessfully) able to use their research services. The story for SUNET is actually pretty good – two of the universities in the "successful" column (Stockholm university and Umeå university) are SWAMID members and no Swedish universities are found in the unsuccessful column.

This means that Swedish researchers are able to participate in collaborations where some of their colleagues from other parts of the world failed. This is good news for SUNET and Swedish research but it remains a serious problem for global research communities.

Getting to the bottom of this problem will require NRENS to think about their federations in a new way: the national federations were often built in order to support a few very specific use-cases (eg access to library resources or commercial services). In SUNET the killer app was our e-meeting service.

As campuses grow more comfortable with the technology, they no longer need the federation to facilitate connection with all services. Some NRENS see this as a threat. This is a mistake; the role of the federation operator is to provide trust, not to be the sole owner of magic technology that nobody else understands.

The federation community need to stop worrying about competing with commercial service brokers and start to consider research as core business instead of treating it like a corner case.

Skriven av



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