A series of fortunate events: a decade of enabling national research access and a new era of inter-organisational collaboration

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Background

Collaboration in research and education is more important than ever. It begins with authenticating the identities of collaboration partners. Ten years ago, CAUDIT created the Australian Access Federation (AAF) as a national response to inter-organisational authentication challenges and to enable universities and research organisations to share teaching, learning and research infrastructure without the liability of managing credentials for external users.

Method

A new era of collaboration commenced between Australian research and education organisations with an agreed policy framework and common technical standards (noting different implementation approaches).

AAF faced a 'chicken-and-egg' scenario. Organisations issuing researcher identities wanted access to electronic resources (services) before joining. Likewise, service providers wanted the Federation to expand their customer base.

Through an extensive awareness and education campaign and strong leadership from a small, committed group of influential champions, the Federation eventually reached a tipping point. The Federation became the preferred way to connect scholars with the services they needed and growth became less resource intensive.

Findings

The journey to sustainability has paid off with lower barriers to inter-organisational collaboration and the growth of discipline-specific and multidisciplinary research hubs, which now enable the diversification of national research opportunities. AAF's underpinning authentication service has accelerated the adoption of federally funded research infrastructure initiatives such as the creation of virtual labs by NeCTAR (now ARDC).

Transformational initiatives need extensive outreach to achieve success. This work never completely disappears. Even after crossing the tipping point, key people leave customer organisations, so service providers must regularly reinforce the value of their offerings.

Discussion

By building on past successes, the AAF is well-positioned to deliver sustainable shared services in an increasingly sophisticated and unpredictable research and education landscape. New services such as the Open Researcher Contributor ID (ORCiD[1]), international federation connectivity through eduGAIN[2], and cloud platforms for federation have allowed the AAF to diversify how they support and enable national and international research. But there is more work to be done in this space to travel along the adoption curve.

This presentation discusses the challenges of bringing shared services to the education and research sector and explores the methods that have successfully enabled sophisticated international collaborations like the Murchison Widefield Array telescope[3].

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[1] orcid.org
[2] edugain.org
[3] www.mwatelescope.org