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Coping with growing demands by cooperation across universities on the IT service level

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According to our observation, universities' IT service departments either get bogged down by the multiplicity of (valid) demands or simply is unable to fulfil a portion of these demands. On the other hand, users often do not even know about those services that exist. We learned that from a short survey conducted as part of a project. So, IT has to cope with the set union of all users' demands. In the meantime, the same users, due to this lack of information, add new demands. Often, IT's standard way to cope with this situation is to confine to "standardized" services. However, in the days of various cloud service offerings –public or private –such a confinement bears the risk that these standardized services compete directly with services available from the cloud. In the meanwhile, the individualization that has been avoided is now deeply missing since it could be the value to the academic users that IT could add to cloud services.

Our presentation shows examples of this and other recent user surveys that reveal parts of the expectations from IT, and real-world examples of cross-university collaborations infrastructure that allow to leverage the positive scaling effects of bundling and simultaneously create the freedom to engage in individualized service flavors.

The first example is the creation of a federated identity management. While cross-site or even global authentication is well known for stateless services like access to WiFi by eduroam, for true collaborative services we need persistent authentication that allows to tie group memberships and roles to an identifier. To our knowledge, the handling of groups –based on accounts or on identities - is still most often done within each particular IT service. This is perfect in the sense that the interpretation of a certain role depends on the particular service when it comes to granting special permissions etc. However, the definition of a project group has the same meaning, independently of a particular service. From our perspective an identity based, service-spanning authentication and authorization is inevitable either to build collaborating in IT systems as well as to run cross-site workflows that imply any sort of distinct roles. This the more since from a scientific perspective a separate view on resources and services like computing, data storage, collaboration etc. is outdated. Thus, the creation of a process infrastructure for the easy use of cross-university services is an essential building block that subsequently enables integration into higher-level infrastructures.

Our "example service" is the newly created cross-university backup-service in a part of Germany, covering 42 universities. The support model as well as the role concept that is necessary to establish a tiered self-service architecture relies on federated identity management mentioned above.

We state that these examples show how IT can cope with current challenges to deliver services of high quality and make them accessible to a wide range of users. Simultaneously, by collaborative service delivery, IT regains free room to innovate services and to enhance the "standard" services by individual, user specific add-ons.

Most suitable track

Collaborating across boundaries

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