Since its inception 10 years ago SURFconext, the Identity Federation of The Netherlands, has been helping students, teachers and researchers to connect to a wide range of systems and resources, not only in The Netherlands but, thanks to eduGAIN interoperability, around the world.

Last year SURFconext enabled over 90 million log-ins from more than 1,300,000 unique users across 154 Identity Providers. With almost 1,500,000 potential users in the Netherlands nearly 93% of the student and researcher population are now able to use SURFconext.

Not only are the number of users continuing to grow but the number of affiliated services is also on the rise. With 730 connected services, SURFconext grew strongly last year. There were a number of reasons why 260 new services joined:

- a large number of senior secondary vocational education (MBO) institutions started using SURFconext;
- there was a sharp increase in connected electronic learning environments and many new international services were linked by means of eduGAIN.

For these reasons, the number of Service Providers connected in 2017 increased by more than 56% compared to 2016.

Strong Authentication growing explosively

Many institutions rely on SURFconext to enable their users to securely log in to cloud services. Using SURFconext Strong Authentication, this can be done even more securely. In 2017 it also became possible to link services that are not connected to SURFconext to Strong Authentication. The second factor is used to complement an existing service within the institution that is not linked to SURFconext. As a result, usage increased explosively from around 1,000 logins per quarter via Strong Authentication in early 2016 to over 165,000 in the second quarter of 2017.

This ability is a very strong selling point for SURFconext in the R&E sector as concerns grow about security and data safety on-line.

As Arnout Terpstra, Product Manager at SURFconext, explains: "SURFconext and eduGAIN provide a reasonably strong level of assurance within the Service Provider community because the underlying identities have been authenticated by the original ‘home’ institutions and are up-to-date (unlike a self-declared identity through a public website). In the era of fake news and fake users this assurance is very important to Service Providers. Strong authentication provides even greater assurance for Service Providers particularly when accessing sensitive data or services."

Ease of use is key to adoption

SURFconext uses the hub and spoke model for its Identity Federation. This makes the connection between an IdP and Service Provider a simple point and click action using the SURFconext IdP dashboard. Again this simplicity makes SURFconext extremely popular and cost-effective for Service Providers and IdPs alike which underscores the extremely high adoption rates and growth.

SURFconext - looking forward with eduGAIN and AARC

Federated Identity management makes collaboration across R&E simpler – particularly international collaborations - and it is for this reason that SURFconext is an active participant in international projects such as AARC as well as being a key participant in GÉANT’s Trust and Identity activities. The AARC project is designed to closely collaborate with existing research collaborations and e-Infrastructure providers to help develop identity policies and technical frameworks based on actual community requirements. This benefits research collaborations worldwide by producing unified policies and technical frameworks between users and services whilst still meeting the needs of security and privacy.

With Federated Identity becoming an essential component of national and international collaboration and the growth in acceptance of these technologies both in R&E and across the commercial sector, it looks like SURFconext will have another busy and exciting 10 years ahead of it.

https://edugain.geant.org
https://aarc-project.eu/