

Federation Without Boundaries

Federation Without Boundaries

What is *interfederation*? The goal of interfederation is to *dissolve federation boundaries*. If and when that goal is achieved, the term “interfederation” will simply disappear from use since “interfederation” will be indistinguishable from what we now call “federation.” In other words, **interfederation is the new federation!**

We’ve seen this happen before. Once upon a time, the terms “internet,” “intranet,” and “extranet” were widely used. As network boundaries blurred, that distinction mostly vanished, and with it the old terminology simply collapsed onto a single term: *internet* (with or without a capital “I” depending on your point of view). Exactly the same phenomenon will happen with the terms “federation” and “interfederation.” The latter is merely a short-term manifestation of a maturing federated model.

Interfederation is still very much in its infant stage. At this point in its evolution, the focus is on metadata aggregation. There are two well-known SAML metadata aggregator implementations used for interfederation purposes:

- [Shibboleth Metadata Aggregator](#) (Java, XSLT)
- [Python Federation Feeder \(pyFF\)](#)

AFAIK the latter is used by [eduGAIN](#) to aggregate the metadata for R&E federations worldwide. So far 37 R&E federations have joined eduGAIN, and of those, 28 are actively exporting metadata.

InCommon joined eduGAIN in April 2014 amid great fanfare (see the [press release](#)) but the truth of the matter is that InCommon has been slow to interfederate. I’m happy to say that has been turned around, largely due to the efforts of Ian Young, perhaps the world’s foremost expert on metadata, metadata aggregation, and interfederation. With Ian’s help, InCommon is quietly making its way onto the interfederation scene.

For instance, InCommon is poised to announce a [Per-Entity Metadata Pilot Study](#), an activity previously recommended by the [Metadata Distribution WG](#). To support this pilot study, we’ve deployed an instance of a Metadata Query Server based on Ian’s [mdq-server](#) reference implementation of the [Metadata Query Protocol](#).

In parallel with the pilot study, InCommon Operations will deploy new tooling based on the Shibboleth Metadata Aggregator. This tooling will allow us to ramp up our export activities, at which point all InCommon participants will be given the opportunity to export their entity metadata to eduGAIN.

To be eligible to participate in interfederation activities, an organization must be an InCommon participant in good standing. Beyond that, IdP and SP metadata exported to eduGAIN must meet certain basic requirements expected of all SAML deployments. Next week’s [TechEx conference](#) will give us an opportunity to discuss these requirements with the InCommon community. Please join us at TechEx in Indianapolis!