

## **Early career researchers can help fix peer review delays**

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# Early career researchers can help fix peer review delays

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Getting a research manuscript through the peer review and publishing process has proved a difficult, sometimes painful, task for academics in the past year or so.

For many submitting authors, peer review processes have become drawn out for months and post-review editorial decisions have been delayed as busy editors and reviewers contend with the backlog of work caused by ongoing disruptions from the Covid pandemic.

With these logjams slowing science, it is worth considering how we might reform the already-weary peer review system to fix this problem. Put simply, the increase in the number of articles, issues and journals seen in recent years requires many more editors and reviewers, but from where?

Bringing less experienced early career researchers into the system is a good place to start. It may run contrary to the idea of “perfect peer review”, in which reviewers are veteran researchers with decades of experience of spotting errors or avenues for improvement, but including younger researchers would have

many upsides, allowing us to harness enthusiasm, skill and intellectual capabilities regardless of limited experience.

Many scientific geniuses produced their most revolutionary work at young ages, too, so could they also apply that energy to peer review? Albert Einstein changed the landscape of physics by the time he was 26, and Isaac Newton made most of his discoveries as an “early career researcher” in his early twenties. Today, these great minds would not get anywhere near the review process on account of their relative inexperience.

But the bigger problem is perhaps motivation. Why would early career researchers want to undertake the underappreciated hard work of editorial services when they could instead further their own careers?

As I suggested in the journal [Learned Publishing](#) in July, early career researchers should be encouraged to join editorial teams, but we must change the structures in academia so this work advances their careers. Working as an editor should receive greater recognition and reward from universities, and senior editors should think about creating many more training opportunities for younger researchers.

The key requirements for any early career researcher joining an editorial team are to learn the rules, become an excellent communicator, learn to read in different roles and be prepared to do their homework; but often there is little information or support about how to acquire these competencies.

That said, unlike the eras of Newton and Einstein, it is almost impossible to imagine a situation where a promising young researcher is given a prominent editorial role without authoring a handful of top papers. Yet should this always be the case, even if authoring, reviewing and editing are closely related jobs in academia?

There is more scope to allow younger academics into the system, I believe. For this condition to be satisfied, senior editors and heads of research labs must support early career researchers keen to become more involved in the review process by providing training opportunities, mock review exercises and editing assignments.

My experiences of building my own research centre at a young private research university in Hanoi, Vietnam, could offer some hints.

I started the institution nearly six years ago, underfunded, with a handful of undergraduates. I had to work out a programme of study for the youngsters to catch up with research skills so that their studies might later become of good standards.

My mentees were also given assignments and contexts that would soon reflect the nature of the reviewing and editing jobs. For quite some time, the undergraduates trained to read, write, debate and learn the rules.

The transformations eventually paid off for them. Now my team has grown to house eight members, including four doctoral candidates. Many of them have

authored articles in quality journals, and I think their experience as peer reviewers paved the way for their success. For instance, three have played a number of different editorial roles: guest editor, associate editor and review editor.

Editorial roles for early career researchers are not risks or threats to academic publishing – they are an amazing opportunity. These researchers represent a promising force for positive changes and continual innovations, which the system badly needs.

But this change can take place only if research is willing to embrace progressive cultural values system in academia, rather than cling to traditional methods that unwisely exclude so much talent from our peer review system.

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## REFERENCES

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