

# Amidst criticism of the peer review process, the valuable contributions of reviewers should be defended



*As flaws in the peer review process are highlighted and calls for reform become more frequent, it may be tempting for some to denigrate and dismiss the contributions of the reviewers themselves. **Maxine David** has been witness to this and here makes an appeal to give space to recognise those who offer their time and expertise voluntarily and generously.*

It is difficult as an academic today, perhaps especially so for those working in the UK, not to feel that our profession is under attack. Regular readers of *Times Higher Education* or Twitter will not have missed [Lord Adonis's](#) recent uninformed criticism of an academic's life today. I was not alone in "hitting back" and the sense of collegiality that Lord Adonis unwittingly unleashed was welcome and uplifting. That was soon undermined for me personally by reading comments on Facebook that fell into that all-too-familiar category of editor-and-reviewer-bashing and which drew a queue of others wanting a place on that particular bandwagon. As a journal editor who has given up a fair amount of my spare time to ask others to give up theirs to review new submissions, this was ever so slightly depressing.

Have we made ourselves easy game to the Adonises of this world by not advertising all the unpaid work we engage in, including reviewing and editing, and by spending more time complaining about our colleagues than lauding them? Here then is a plea for us to spend more time giving public thanks to those who help us improve our work. It won't take long to read – not nearly as long as it took the reviewer to read your work (for free).

I am not naïve or ignorant; I am aware of the many good reasons for arguing the [peer review process is broken](#). There are reviewers and journal editors out there who get it wrong. For instance, I have never forgotten a fellow academic telling me with pride how they had recommended rejecting the last handful and more of articles they had reviewed. The recommendations may have been justified, the tone of pride was not. Some reviewers get it terribly wrong by forgetting there is a human who sweated for weeks, even months, over a piece of work and who therefore does not need savaging at the end of it. In an era of rising awareness of [mental health issues](#) amongst academics, this is doubly wrong. In that environment, editors failing to mediate reviews is deeply problematic. As hard as I try, I do not always get it right myself and I understand authors' frustrations. However, as an editor, I also see the positives of the peer review process.

Privately, I get a *lot* of emails from authors who thank the reviewers for all the work on their articles. Occasionally, authors acknowledge the assistance of the reviewers in the acknowledgement. In seeing this, I can hardly be alone. Why is it then that I rarely see such positive comments made more generally and publicly? Could it be the age-old story that we are very good at advertising our bad experiences, but very bad at advertising the positives? Authors complain about reviewers who write in a destructive rather than constructive fashion, who focus on weaknesses and ignore strengths but in our tendency to criticise rather than laud reviewers, aren't we ourselves guilty of only concentrating on the "nasty stuff" experienced in publishing and not the good?

Reviewers work for free and I am not aware of a university anywhere that credits its academic staff with undertaking this type of work. In the non-Lord Adonis universe, academics are overworked. That may indeed impact on the quality of reviews, though, again, my experience is of dedicated and helpful reviewers who understand what it is like to receive a bad review and work hard to craft a constructive, comprehensive, and palatable one, even if the recommendation is to reject. That takes time. Did I say it was time given freely?

I have found it telling that most often it is PhD candidates and early-career researchers who write emails telling me how useful they found reviewer comments, that they really helped the author improve the article but, more importantly, have traction beyond the article in question. In other words, the reviewers have proved invaluable to them in terms of learning their craft. As professionals who presumably all buy into the concept of lifelong learning, shouldn't we all be valuing – more demonstrably – those reviewers who do provide invaluable suggestions?

Finding reviewers is a time-consuming, often wearying process. It is not uncommon to go to more than ten reviewers before I find two. I sympathise, the academic workload is heavy. However, I wonder whether all those who criticise contribute as reviewers themselves. Maybe so. But I find it odd to see so many criticisms of reviewers; why are they not offset by the same number of people acting as reviewers themselves and therefore improving the quality of reviews? Maybe they are but we just don't hear about it, or perhaps some reflection is needed. So, next time you criticise (no matter how justifiably) a reviewer, ask yourself the last time you agreed to review an article and reflect on the quality of that review. I suggest our yardstick should be to review an article for each article we ourselves write and send to review. And then to write a review that we could read about our own work without feeling unnecessarily bruised and which would help us improve not only that article but our research more generally.

The final point applies for journal editors too. Writing a good review requires time, dedication and crafting. A good review is not produced in a minute or even an hour. The process relies entirely on academics willing to give back to their own community, many of them working within a wider structural environment that has severely narrowed the space for such give-back and which certainly does not recognise it. By all means, let's debate the review process. But in that debate, let's not forget to give space to recognise those who give their time and expertise voluntarily and generously.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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