

**Editorial**

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# My personal encounter with reviewer fatigue: Strategies for broadening the reviewer pool in a period of peer review crisis

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**Abstract:** This editorial presents my personal encounter with reviewer fatigue as an editor and peer reviewer, dedicated to help in improving the scientific papers that are published by academic journals. I then highlight strategies I feel could help broaden the pool of reviewers during this period of peer review crisis. While reviewing manuscripts presents itself as a healthy exercise that could potentially enhance the professionalism of every scholar, reviewer fatigue is fatal to the scholar and the journals. Hence, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must put up strategies to help their staff and students nurture the love for volunteering to conduct editorial and peer reviews. Strategies suggested in this editorial include research professors mainstreaming the art of peer reviewing into their research methods lessons, senior scholars co-reviewing manuscripts with junior colleagues and students as a means of mentoring, HEIs rewarding scholars who are remarkable in the conduct of peer reviews during staff promotion and annual award ceremonies, journals showing recognition for peer reviewers through various means including monetary tokens if they are profit-making journals. This editorial firmly asserts that every true scholar must deem the conduct of peer review as a necessary activity that improves science while mentoring students to develop a love for it to sustain the peer review system, an essential ingredient for maintaining the scientific rigor and integrity of published papers.

**Keywords** – Academic journals, Higher education institutions, Peer review crisis, Peer review editorial review, Review fatigue

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I am an academic who loves to help in knowledge production. I am overjoyed whenever I see the publication of a fully baked scholarly manuscript. I consider a manuscript that has gone through the thorough peer review process, whether independent review, open review, or double-blind review as fully baked. To me, if a manuscript skips the peer review process, I consider such a manuscript as half-baked because it has not gotten the chance to be improved by peer experts in the field of inquiry. I hold the personal philosophy that knowledge production is not the monopoly of a person or group of persons. Considering the views of others, which peer review does, is an excellent way of reflecting on your manuscript and fixing all of its loose ends. To help journals and other academic publication outlets ensure that manuscripts published are fully baked, I have decided to voluntarily partake in the

peer review processes for various journals. I don't do this voluntary work in my leisure time or when I get time. It is a crucial part of my planned activities for the day, week, month, and year. My record at Web of Science shows that I have reviewed over 500 research papers and conducted over 100 editorial reviews for various journals. I strive very hard to perform quality peer review activities for journals at no charge, even under the 'evil advice' of colleagues who think it's a waste of precious time to engage in more financially driven academic pursuits. Personally, my professional development as an academic has largely been influenced by the myriad of manuscripts that I have assessed as an editor and as a peer reviewer. I have written on this briefly in my article titled 'Writing Scholarly Papers: A Window from my Experiences' published in the International Multidisciplinary Research Journal, Volume 8, Issue 1, pages 1-9. More so, my efforts as a peer reviewer have been acknowledged and continue to be recognized through award recognition as well as various invitations to academic engagements by organizations and institutions. I received a Top Reviewer award in 2018 from Publons. In that same year, I was asked to be a mentor at the Publons Academy to mentor other scholars on how to carry out effective peer reviews of manuscripts. As a result, I cherish invitations received to help in the peer review or editorial process of journal, book, or conference papers submitted.

However, I now experience reviewer fatigue. Reviewer fatigue is a term used to refer to the exhaustion and burnout that reviewers experience from the unbridled demands for peer review with other professional and personal commitments (Sabibulla, 2024). Now, I feel very overwhelmed with such invitations. I have volunteered as an editor for leading journals such as Scientific African, Frontiers in Environmental Science, and Frontiers in Human Dynamics and as a peer reviewer for countless journals including PLoS ONE, BMC Journals, Taylor and Francis Journals, Elsevier Journals, and others. On average, I receive not less than eight editorial or peer review invitations from various journals apart from those that I personally serve as an Editor-in-Chief. This implies that I review manuscripts everyday. I understand that this is a result of the high number of academic journals and the submissions they receive on a daily basis. While I personally love to do this work because knowledge production from research is needed to make the world a better place and I am at liberty to decline or accept the invitation, I feel very downhearted to witness this sad development. Though painful, I believe I have to decline invitations if they are not within my scope of research and I genuinely don't have time to perform the review activity. In such an instance, the best action I have taken is to refer journals to some potential scholars whom I think could perform the review. Yet, many colleagues are reluctant to help with the peer or editorial review process when they receive such invitations. Granted, some have genuine reasons for turning down the review invitation. For instance, they may not have time due to work overloads such as attending to equally important or genuine academic engagements, conflict of interest, lack of expertise in the field of the manuscript, or in the technical know-how of the peer/editorial review activity. However, others turn down the offer primarily because they feel that it is not juicy financially or matters less in the professional promotion in their institutions.

This has got me thinking and wondering about what is happening to the voluntary spirit of scholars and what has come to be referred to as the 'crisis of the peer review process' (Flaherty, 2022). I don't think scholars who are like-minded are not in existence but they are rare. Yet, how do we get others on board and how do we revive the voluntary spirit of scholars for them to engage in peer review? This paper adopts a narrative writing technique in shedding insight on my experiences as an editor and peer reviewer who had experienced reviewer fatigue but aims at projecting helpful strategies that HEIs and journals could adopt to help ensure the sustenance of the art of reviewing manuscripts to improve the state of scientific productions globally.

### 1.1. Strategies for Broadening the Reviewer Pool in a Period of Peer Review Crisis

First, I think higher education institutions must rekindle and revamp voluntary academic services in the academic training of students. The importance of engaging in voluntary academic services such as peer reviews should form part of the curriculum for conducting research and academic writing. Students must be instructed on the need to offer voluntary services in improving science. This should be a priority area in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Professors who teach research must give assignments to students on conducting peer reviews using prescribed review templates. When this feat is achieved, students will nurture the desire to voluntarily engage in academic services, at least, without expecting monetary incentives. Practical sessions on how to conduct peer reviews based on rigorous frameworks must be organized for postgraduate students especially. Professors teaching research at HEIs could offer points for grading students for attending webinar sessions on how to conduct peer reviews such as those organized by SAGE, QUVAE, and others. The examples I have mentioned are organizations that have personally invited me to attend academically refreshing webinar sessions on how to conduct peer reviews. There are countless resources available on the websites of various journals and research organizations on how to conduct editorial and peer reviews. These are some helpful links on how to conduct effective peer reviews for journals:

<https://authorservices.wiley.com/Reviewers/journal-reviewers/how-to-perform-a-peer-review/index.html>

<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/how-to-review-articles>

<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/how-to-be-a-peer-reviewer-webinar>

<https://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/publishing-your-research/peer-review/>

<https://www.reviewercredits.com/useful-resources-for-peer-reviewers/>

<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/beginner%E2%80%99s-guide-peer-review-system>

Links to such helpful resources could be readily made available to postgraduate students by their instructors to read. A class discussion session could be organized for students to share the benefits that have been derived from those resources. Such discursive sessions could be very refreshing to students in developing 'taste' for conducting peer and editorial reviews for journals.

Also, seasoned scholars could co-review manuscripts with their postgraduate students. This would serve as a platform for them to nurture the students not only on how to conduct effective peer reviews but also in understanding the quality indicators for writing excellent manuscripts. Some top-tier journals such as PLoS ONE and many others do acknowledge the assistance that students offered to their mentors or seasoned scholars during the review of manuscripts. The senior colleague who officially received the invitation is made to state the name of any student who aided in the conduct of the peer review.

Policies on staff promotion in HEIs must acknowledge and prioritize these helpful and voluntary academic services such as peer and editorial reviews. This recognition by academic institutions would help get mass scholars to accept to review manuscripts to improve the quality of articles published as well as reduce unnecessary publication delays (Tite & Schroter, 2007). While some HEIs assign some scores or points for such services, others do not. Even those who often assign points for editorial and peer review activities for their staff promotion give it minimal value. As such, many of our colleagues see the acceptance and conduct of peer reviews as a 'not too important business', 'a waste of precious time', and even a 'disturbing thorn in the flesh'. I recall a senior colleague who told me blatantly when I was engaged at the HEI that I shouldn't waste my time on peer review activities because it has no significant merit during my promotion. Yet, I cannot discredit the immense benefits I have had from conducting peer reviews and how it has shaped my professional development in the field. Hence, I hold the view that HEIs must consciously task their staff to mandatorily conduct peer review by giving it a high weight

during staff promotion exercises. Annual award ceremonies organized in HEIs aimed at recognising and celebrating the academic achievements of staff must have an award category for scholars in the academic institutions whose contributions toward editorial and/or peer reviews are remarkable.

While I have underscored that engaging in peer and editorial reviews is a voluntary task that scholars should not ideally expect monetary remuneration, paid journals that take article processing charges from authors must reconsider offering a monetary token of appreciation to their editors and peer reviewers. I agree with Vines and Mudditt (2021) that paid journals should know the success of their activities largely depends on the editors and peer reviewers. Profit-making journals must not be selfish and greedy in keeping all the profit earned to themselves but must offer monetary rewards for the hardworking editors and peer reviewers. The quality of a manuscript is often judged by the rigorous work of editors and peer reviewers who act as academic gatekeepers, ensuring that the quality metrics and scholarliness of a manuscript are ensured. As a token of appreciation, the paid journals must budget for monetary incentives to these hardworking editors and peer reviewers (Vesper, 2018). That said, paid journals must have a ToR for this payment clearly indicated in the contract or invitation sent to editors and peer reviewers.

Journals must find innovative ways of acknowledging the efforts put in by reviewers to improve the quality of the manuscripts they publish. Sadly, in a survey conducted by Tite and Schroter (2007), 258 reviewers declined peer review invitations because of the failure of journals to formally acknowledge previous reviews they had conducted. Journals must honor and demonstrate a high level of dignity towards peer reviewers by showing appreciation for their efforts. A formal thank you email acknowledgment and even the offering of review acknowledgment certificates sent to peer reviewers is a positive sign of such kind appreciation. Many of such journals have signed up to the Web of Science and Publons partnered system of keeping track of all editorial and peer reviews conducted by scholars on their created profiles. This record of scholars conducting editorial and peer reviews could offer them a competitive advantage in applications for staff promotion, research grants, and other leadership positions in academic institutions. Other journals offer publication vouchers for potential submission of manuscripts to their journal by the peer reviewers. Others also offer special discounts to peer reviewers for their books and journal articles under paywalls. All of these forms of acknowledgment of the efforts of peer reviewers are commendable as they could potentially fuel their sustained interest in peer review activities.

## CONCLUSION

Editorial and peer reviews are necessary academic activities that significantly improve scientific publications. Without these gatekeepers, the integrity and quality of published articles may be difficult to determine. Scholars in HEIs are responsible for performing these roles. Yet, the activities have been left to a few scholars who experience review fatigue. To remedy the situation, HEIs must prioritise and recognise editorial and peer reviews conducted by their staff during staff promotions, and annual academic recognition award ceremonies. Professors teaching research methods must incorporate practical lessons on why and how to conduct reviews for academic journals. Senior colleagues must mentor junior colleagues on how to conduct peer reviews effectively by co-reviewing manuscripts with them. On the other hand, journals must acknowledge their reviewers and demonstrate support for their services in diverse forms including monetary incentives should they generate profit from the publication of the papers. To ensure the sustainability of the editorial and peer review systems, it is crucial now in this period of peer review crisis to recruit more peer reviewers. This can only be realised when academic journals and HEIs make the conduct of such activities truly refreshing and rewarding.

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