



How to find and reward reviewers – a case study

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So I've called my very brief case study "Referees and/in/of *Regional Studies*" to demonstrate I think the really symbiotic relationship that most journals have with their reviewers, which I think my colleagues have set up also earlier in this session.

Regional Studies is a flagship journal of the Regional Studies Association, a learned society based in the UK. For a social science journal it's quite a large one, we have about 800 submissions and publish 12 issues a year. It is by its very nature, international, interdisciplinary, and spatial, which brings us particular challenges in terms of securing referees.

So what do we do? The first thing that we do is we try to make the task smaller. We do this by desk rejecting quite a large proportion of the papers that are submitted to the journal. Now, the majority of these are rejected because they do not fit the remit of the journal, others perhaps because they do not meet the basic quality standards that we are looking for either in terms of methodology or in terms of the theoretical background and setup of the paper and its new contribution to the field.

When we do this we're very conscious of giving feedback to our authors, and we make sure that there is always some feedback that goes with those letters to help those authors to place their papers hopefully in a more appropriate outlet or to identify the key thing that they really need to work on before submitting a paper elsewhere.

The next stage is that we delegate to experts, and by this I mean we have a very large team of Handling or Associate Editors. What we try to do is get every submission to an editor who is better located in that particular field. Now, of course that has its limits in terms of 800 submissions a year, but by trying to divide up the task between editors we hope to have more success and less of these bounce backs in terms of perhaps approaching referees who are not best placed to review a particular paper.

Thirdly, as I said, the journal is very interdisciplinary, it's very international, and it's very spatial, so what we might need to do is not expect to find all of the qualifications in one referee. So we will perhaps need to look for referees who can comment on the methodology, somebody who might comment on the disciplinary background or theory, and someone who might comment on the spatial location in which the research is actually about. Now sometimes that person might be a perfect package, somebody who can comment on all of those things. But we also need to recognize that that's not always going to be the case.

Once editors are selecting referees, they do so using various network searches and tools. So my editors tell me that the main thing they are doing is using their own networks, for example, people they know. And this is also expanded within the context of learned society journals by the number of events and conferences that editors attend at which they are visible, and at which they are able to meet researchers in their field. But, of course, a personal connection is not always possible.

So editors will use a range of searches, they will look at references lists, for example, for ideas, they will use Google searches, they will occasionally use referee locator within ScholarOne manuscripts.

We will also look through the back history of the journal in terms of who has published with us previously because that helps to identify people who are writing from the particular convergence of disciplines that we work within.

And how do we reward these referees? The first thing we do is we inform them of the outcome, and again, this is increasingly easy-to-do through peer review management software, just to let them know what decision has been taken on the paper. We also try to respect their time by not asking referees to review too many papers within a short period of time. We also have a series of public recognition initiatives that we do, some of which are very common to many journals. The journal is integrated, for example, in Publons. We also publish an annual list of referees in the final issue of each volume. We also do awards, which again I think is something that learned societies and publishers can support. So the Regional Studies Association has awards annually for the best referees on each of its journals, and that includes three referees from *Regional Studies* who are invited to an annual president's dinner in London to receive their award, and a notification of this is published both online and in print in the journals.

In particular cases where a referee we feel is working really hard for the journal, we might think, "Actually, we could benefit more from the person being involved in the journal," and they might be, as it were, promoted to join the editorial board, both in recognition of their service and also to harness some of their reviewing power.

The continuing challenges for us I think reflect those of many journals, but with the spatial element also in terms of identifying referees who can bring that local knowledge and ensure that papers are being reviewed by people who are within the context that is being discussed. And I think this is where initiatives such as those that Di has talked about are interesting in terms of helping peer reviewers from the countries that we are receiving an increasing number of submissions from, particularly the BRICs countries.

New topics are a challenge for us. There are areas that I think most journals would like to cover under their remit, but perhaps they do not always receive the submissions on. And a challenge for that is approaching referees who perhaps might not think of the journal as the place where they would publish, and may be therefore less inclined to accept a review request. But then it becomes a very self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of engaging new subject areas.

There is also, as Laura recognized, increasing demand on researchers' time, and we need to be very realistic about how much we can possibly ask of them. Coupled with that is increasing competition. There are ever more submissions made to journals, and ever more new journals who are asking reviewers for their time.

Ok, so that's it from me, thank you.