

# Invisible scholars: A case for formal acknowledgement of peer reviewers and journal editors



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## How to cite this article:

Munsamy AJ. Invisible scholars: A case for formal acknowledgement of peer reviewers and journal editors. *Afr Vision Eye Health*. 2025;84(1), a1127. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aveh.v84i1.1127>

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The publication value chain comprises and may not be limited to submitting authors, peer reviewers, editors, and publishers. Each role player contributes in different, but interdependent ways to ensure that scholarship is disseminated with integrity, accuracy, and impact.<sup>1</sup> Two groups stand out for their vital, yet often invisible contributions: peer reviewers and journal editors. These individuals, usually drawn from academic communities, shoulder the immense responsibility of safeguarding scholarly work's validity and scientific merit. Despite their crucial role, their contributions remain largely unrecognised by their institutions, relegated to the margins of academic workload models.

In 2024, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), through its National Scholarly Editors' Forum (NSEF), renewed its call for formally recognising editorial and peer review activities as legitimate academic outputs.<sup>2</sup> The proposal emphasises that these responsibilities should not remain hidden job functions carried out in academics' 'spare' time, but should instead be acknowledged as integral to the academic enterprise. The statement urges universities, research councils, and other institutions to formally integrate peer review and editorial duties into academic workload allocations and performance evaluation criteria.

This call is neither new nor isolated. Globally, concerns have been raised about the sustainability of the peer review system, given its reliance on unpaid and often unrecognised academic labour.<sup>2</sup> Peer review has traditionally been regarded as a moral responsibility and a form of academic citizenship in which scholars voluntarily contribute to advancing their disciplines.<sup>3</sup> However, in the current climate of increasing teaching loads, pressure to publish, postgraduate supervision responsibilities, and, in some cases, clinical or professional service duties, this expectation greatly strains academics.

## The hidden burden of peer review

Seasoned academics often find themselves inundated with requests for peer review. It is not uncommon for researchers to receive multiple invitations per week from journals across the globe. These invitations arrive amid demanding schedules filled with teaching, research, supervision, grant writing, and administrative responsibilities. For those in health sciences, clinical duties with patients add further complexity. Despite this, many academics accept the responsibility, motivated by a commitment to their field, a desire to give back to the scholarly community, or the belief that peer review is a privilege that comes with membership in the academic profession.

Nevertheless, this contribution is largely invisible. Unlike publications, grants, or patents, peer reviews seldom appear on academic curriculum vitae or institutional performance evaluations. Until recently, even quantifying the number of reviews an academic completed was difficult. Platforms such as Publons (now part of Clarivate) have attempted to create more formal recognition systems by allowing academics to record and showcase their peer review activities.<sup>4</sup> However, this remains voluntary and has yet to be integrated into institutional systems fully.

The lack of recognition is troubling because peer review is not merely administrative work. It involves critical analysis, methodology evaluation, originality assessment, and the ability to contextualise research within a broader disciplinary framework. It may even be considered a scholarship in itself. Peer review helps maintain the quality of the scientific record, prevents the dissemination of flawed or unethical research, and advances knowledge through constructive critique. We may even depend more on peer review today, especially in the era of artificial intelligence, to sometimes even police authenticity.<sup>5</sup> Is overlooking such contributions devaluing a cornerstone of academic integrity?

## The overlooked role of journal editors

If peer reviewers are invisible, journal editors are perhaps doubly so. Editors do more than assign manuscripts to reviewers. They evaluate submissions for fit and merit, make difficult decisions about acceptance or rejection, mediate disputes, and often work with authors to improve manuscripts' clarity, coherence, and rigour.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, they must stay abreast of emerging developments in their fields, maintain ethical standards, and ensure that their journals meet global benchmarks of quality and credibility. These responsibilities are demanding. Editors frequently read hundreds of manuscripts annually, provide detailed feedback, and manage communication between authors, reviewers, and publishers. This work is rarely compensated adequately and often occurs outside regular working hours. For academics juggling teaching, research, and supervision, editorial responsibilities are an additional part-time job.

Universities often celebrate the prestige of having faculty serve as editors of reputable journals. The association enhances institutional reputation and contributes to visibility within global scholarship. However, few institutions provide tangible support for editors, such as workload relief, administrative assistance, or sometimes recognition in promotion and tenure processes. Realising this disconnect between institutional benefit and a lack of support for individual academics is wanting.

## Why recognition matters

The argument for recognition is not simply about fairness to individual academics. It is also about sustaining the scholarly ecosystem. Peer review and editorial work form the backbone of scholarly publishing. Without them, the integrity of the published literature collapses. However, the system relies heavily on goodwill. As workloads increase and recognition remains minimal, there is growing concern that fewer academics will be willing to take on these responsibilities.<sup>4,7</sup> Any journal editor can attest that finding two peer reviewers for a manuscript today is easier said than done.

Recognition can take many forms. Institutions might integrate peer review and editorial work into formal workload models, assigning credit hours or points comparable to other academic activities. Promotion and tenure criteria could explicitly acknowledge such contributions as evidence of service to the discipline. Professional development frameworks could encourage early-career researchers to engage with peer review as a form of scholarly growth. Moreover, institutions could establish committees or support structures for journal editors, providing them with resources to manage their responsibilities effectively.

Some international initiatives provide applicable models. The Hong Kong Principles,<sup>8</sup> for example, advocate for assessing researchers based on publications and activities that foster research integrity, including peer review and

editorial contributions as described in its fifth principle. Similarly, open peer review experiments and recognition platforms demonstrate a growing awareness of the need to value these hidden aspects of scholarship.

## The South African context

In South Africa, the ASSAf statement adds a local dimension to the debate. The country faces challenges, including high university teaching loads, resource constraints, and the pressure to build global competitiveness in research output. Within this environment, expecting academics to shoulder significant peer review and editorial responsibilities without recognition may become unsustainable. The ASSAf call for integrating these functions into institutional performance evaluations is therefore timely and necessary.<sup>2</sup>

The recent NSEF meeting in Johannesburg (August 2025) provided a platform for journal editors to voice their experiences. Editors from diverse disciplines emphasised the immense time commitment required and the lack of institutional mechanisms to support their work. While universities benefit from the prestige of having staff affiliated with journals, few provide the resources needed to sustain these contributions. Addressing this imbalance is critical if South African scholarship remains credible and competitive.

## Conclusion

Peer reviewers and journal editors are the invisible scholars of academia. They dedicate countless hours to safeguarding the quality of the scientific record, often without compensation, recognition, or institutional support. Their contributions are not optional extras but essential components of the academic enterprise. Recognising these hidden roles is not merely a matter of fairness, it is a matter of sustainability. The publication value chain cannot function without the dedication of reviewers and editors. Yet, if their contributions continue to remain invisible, the system risks collapse under the weight of unrecognised labour. Institutions must act decisively, adopting statements such as those proposed by ASSAf, and aligning with international principles that value academic citizenship. To sustain scholarly publishing and uphold academic integrity, academic institutions must bring these invisible scholars out of the shadows and into the light. An optometrist by training, correcting myopic vision is one of my clinical responsibilities. As a journal editor, I trust this editorial will correct the vision of institutions that remain myopic to peer reviewers and journal editors.

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