

The importance of diversity in peer review

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A common response to the assertion that “we need more diversity in peer review” is that “peer review has nothing to do with diversity; it is only the experience and the credentials of a reviewer that count”. To explore the role of diversity in the peer review process and to celebrate Peer Review Week 2018, Researcher Academy hosted a webinar with experts Shirin Heidari from EASE and Sanjana Balu from Sense about Science. In the webinar, the speakers discussed two approaches to fostering diversity in peer review. While Shirin examined how peer reviewers can enhance the strength and quality of research by focusing on the importance and impact of sex and gender, Sanjana delineated the need for early career researchers to be (more) actively involved in the peer review process.

| Strength lies in differences, not in similarities

- Stephen R. Covey

Here are some quick takeaways from the webinar:

1. **Referees have a part to play in identifying and improving the presentation of gender and sex-impacted research:**

According to Shirin, the lack of sensitivity to gender/sex in research impacts reproducibility and increases the risk of failure of a study's practical implications. She explained how peer reviewers can help identify sex/gender blindness in research and flag concerns or advise the authors to be more explicit in their study and experiments, especially if the sample(s) from which they draw their conclusions could be impacted by differences or similarities in terms of sex or gender.



2. **We need better reviewing guidelines for reviewers:**

Highlighting her research in the area, Shirin pointed to the [SAGER guidelines](#) as a potential benchmark for how peer reviewers can ensure research accurately reports gender or sex differences or similarities. She elaborated on how peer reviewers have a duty to review each part of a manuscript to make sure that the findings presented therein are not generalised if the study has failed to take into account a particular sex or gender. The guidelines present a comprehensive procedure for reporting sex and gender information in a study's design as well as the analysis and interpretation of its results.

3. **Editors can get involved in promoting diversity, too:**

Ensuring a diverse peer review experience is not only dependent on reviewers, but editors can also support this process by determining whether diversity is relevant to the initial submission and assessing if it has been adequately addressed. This can also be inculcated in the editors via regular training and ensuring that all involved with the assessment and publication of an article are aware of, and can act on, the issue of diversity.

4. **More ECRs should get involved in peer review:**

According to Sanjana, early career researchers often feel that they don't have sufficient experience to engage in peer review. Sanjana and the other speakers challenged this view and pointed out that ECRs are an extremely valuable source of expertise and that no-one should feel disenfranchised from this key activity. In order for ECRs to get more involved, Sanjana advised them to speak to their supervisor or PI to express interest in peer review, or to go to conferences and attend workshops to network with editors and publishers and build their network. This will ensure a comprehensive immersion of the ECR in their field of interest and should pave the way for future, mutually beneficial collaborations.



5. **Publishers have a role to play here as well :**

The moderator of the webinar, [Christopher Tancock](#) pointed to the fact that we all need

to be involved in the quest to improve diversity, publishers included. He noted that Elsevier has been taking steps to address the issue of (gender and unconscious) bias and is actively equipping its publishers and editors with the tools to not only identify potential bias, but to challenge and tackle it if found. If we can ensure that our editorial teams are diverse and maximally reflect the potential diversity of their respective subject fields; we are better assured of a balanced peer review process and an outcome that is most in tune with the wider scientific community. This activity reflects a growing public recognition of the importance of tackling bias, so it should not come as a surprise that Elsevier, among others, is developing tools and resources for this important subject.

It is clear that much more needs to be done in order to ensure that we move towards a more diverse system of peer review. Important steps are being made, however, and identification of, and education about the issue are chief among these. We hope that this webinar has helped to make you more aware of this subject and has shown you that, even as an ECR, you have a powerful part to play in the challenge to improve diversity in peer review. We look forward to following up with further tools, briefings and resources to respond to this and other important topics. Stay tuned!

5:AM Altmetrics Conference - London

Register now for the 5:AM Altmetrics Conference, taking place on the 26th and 27th of September at the School of Advanced Study in London, UK. Now in its 5th year, the conference provides the opportunity for publishers, researchers, librarians, funders and others from across the scholarly space to discuss and explore issues related to altmetrics and research evaluation.