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The need for speed: the peer-review process and what are we doing about it?

Authors:

Diana Epstein

Virginia Wiseman

Natasha Salaria

Sandra Mounier-Jack

Corresponding Author:

Diana Epstein

Email: hpp.editorialoffice@oup.com

The editorial office receives multiple author requests in regards to the status of their papers. In fact Mondays and Fridays seem to be the busiest time for working on those requests with an average of 20 requests on those particular days.

The intention of this Editorial is to summarise the key steps for processing papers once submitted, explain the different factors affecting turn-around times, and update authors and readers on initiatives HPP is undertaking to speed up the processing of papers.

Upon submission approximately 60% of papers are rejected after internal peer-review with an additional 15-20% being rejected after external peer-review.

This is due to a number of reasons:

- The paper does not focus on a low- and/or middle-income country
- The paper has a very narrow field of interest
- The paper does not discuss the health system or health policy implications of the topic

With the support of an international group of Section Editors, the Editors manage over 700 papers per year. This year we are expecting over 800 submissions and have noticed a yearly increase in submissions in some sections – particularly Health Economics and Health Policy- a good sign, but has resulted in an overload of work for the Section Editors of these particular sections.

At the strategy meeting held last year in London at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Anne Mills suggested the idea of Associate Editors,(Associate Editors are early career professionals who work with the Section Editor to gain editorial insight and experience).The Editors agreed this was a good idea and 2 Associate Editors were invited, Beverly Essue who worked with Virginia Wiseman on the Health Economics section and Yusra Shawra who worked with Jeremy Shiffman on the Health Policy section. This initiative has been so successful that we are pleased to advise that both Associate Editors are now Section Editors and new associate editors are coming on board.

The increase in workload and the expectations of authors can at times be very frustrating on both sides. The initial internal peer-review process can take up to 4 weeks, in extreme circumstances such as-holiday times, there can be an initial delay with reaching decisions. The Editors are constantly inviting reviewers but many “decline” or do not respond. All reviewers when invited are given 7 days to respond to the invitation, when no response is received a reminder is sent, after 14 days if no response is received the reviewer is “uninvited”. In case the reviewer agrees there is 21 day turn-around to complete the review, But on multiple occasions extensions are required.

The reviewers, who agree to review, work on a voluntary base for the journal, carry out peer-review of papers alongside their regular paid work and quite often need additional time. Sometimes there is a trade-off between quality over quantity – it may be worthwhile waiting an extra 2 weeks for a comprehensive review on a particular topic as opposed to a reviewer who completes a review within 14 days but with comments which are not substantive. Sometimes editors have to invite up to a dozen reviewers especially if it is a niche topic.

As a token of appreciation for reviewing for *Health Policy and Planning* the publisher provides a 15% discount on the APC to reviewers who review more than 2 different papers in one calendar year. In addition to this, we also offer a book voucher to our top 10 reviewers at the end of the year.

On some occasions peer-review can take many months but that is not necessarily evidence of a broken system. Some papers require multiple rounds of revisions to address all feedback, some require supplementary reviews by our statistical experts and others require additional English language editing.

The same understanding is shown towards the authors who require a longer time to prepare their revised article, this can result in some manuscripts taking longer than usual to process-since the reviewer may be busy or unavailable when the revised paper is submitted-resulting in a delay with the peer-review process. At times alternate reviewers need to be invited to take over the peer-review process.

This is not to say improvements cannot be made on our side. We have recently taken some actions designed to help address delays including a comprehensive update of our reviewer database, shorter review turnaround times, and as mentioned the appointment of new Associate Editors. Our website has also been re-vamped with clearer instructions to authors including a checklist on ‘how to improve your chances of publication’ and important reminders such as the need to declare any prior publications at the submission stage to avoid delays further down the track. In addition to the regular manuscripts, the journal also publishes supplements. With our dedicated Supplement Editor Mishal Khan and updated timelines for Supplements we hope this will also ensure that the peer-review process will be quicker. As mentioned above, our reviewer incentives including discounts on APC and book vouchers as well as annual reviewer acknowledgements in the journal, are also expected to lead to faster outcomes.

Finally, we would like to thank the Section Editors, Reviewers and the Publisher. Last but not least, we are very grateful to you, the reader, for your support with the journal-without with we would not be so successful.