

Scientists ask, peer review on fast track at what price?

April 1 2015, by Nancy Owano



Credit: Charles Rondeau/public domain

A fast-track peer-review trial is in the news. A Nature Publishing Group (NPG) -owned journal's editorial board member has resigned in protest over a pilot project where researchers pay for faster peer review. Mark Maslin, a professor at University College London, announced on Twitter earlier this month that he had resigned from the editorial advisory panel.

He is bothered that the policy could create a divide between researchers who are poorly funded and their richer colleagues, both taking separate publishing routes. He said, "I think it is setting up a two-tier [system](#)."

The publication is *Scientific Reports*, which charges \$[1,495](#) to publish an article. Since March 24, authors of biology papers who pay an additional \$750 can enjoy a fast track where the journal decides on the submission within three weeks. London-based NPG owns *Scientific Reports* and *Nature*, but the two journals are editorially independent. Why was the fast-track idea started in the first place?

Scientific Reports runs on the open access model; it derives no revenue from subscriptions and charges authors to publish their papers. NPG said that a survey taken last year of its authors found that 70 percent were frustrated over the time [peer review](#) took and 67 percent thought publishers should experiment with alternative peer-review [methods](#), said Daniel Cressey in *Nature News*.

An article in *The Economist* in 2013 said, "Ask a researcher what annoys him most about scientific publishing, and slowness will come near the top of the list of gripes. It takes nearly six months, on average, for a manuscript to wend its way from submission to [publication](#). Worse, before a paper is accepted by a journal, it is often rejected by one or more others."

The fast-track service is currently being run on a trial basis. Nandita Quaderi, publishing director, Nature Publishing Group, has described it as "an opt-in small scale pilot for a limited period of time and one which will not "affect the overall service we provide to authors who don't choose the service."

According to *Nature News*, NPG said in a statement that "we are continually experimenting with different innovations in the publishing

process." They said the fast-track move was "a small pilot to see if a fast-track peer-review service is something that authors and reviewers would find [useful](#)."

The word "useful" was not part of Maslin's reaction to the move. Maslin told *Chemistry World*, "Instead of the best science being published in a timely fashion it will further shift the balance to well-funded labs and groups."

Maslin similarly told *Science Insider*, "My objections are that it sets up a two-tiered system and instead of the best science being published in a timely fashion it will further shift the balance to well-funded labs and groups." Maslin said he recognized that "Academic publishing is going through a revolution and we should expect some bumps along the way. [This](#) was just one that I felt I could not accept."

Chemistry World noted that authors paying the \$750 fee would get a decision within [three](#) weeks of submission, via a service, Rubriq, provided by North Carolina-based Research Square. This is a service specializing in independent peer review. *Science* contributing correspondent John Bohannon reported in *Science Insider* that Research Square's editors recruit scientists around the world as reviewers. The reviewers get paid \$100 for each completed review. The review process includes an online scorecard. "So far, Research Square's CEO, Shashi Mudunuri said, the [company](#) has about 1400 active reviewers who have scored 920 papers."

In a guest post on *Nature's* "Of Schemes and Memes" community blog, Quaderi talked about the Research Square relationship: "The fast-track service is being provided in partnership with a third party, Research Square, using their Rubriq peer-review [system](#), which incentivizes its reviewers with a fee per review. The trial is currently restricted to biology manuscripts, which is an area that Rubriq has a long-established

reputation of supporting with its peer review service." Quaderi also said that, "Needless to say, an author choosing the fast-track option is only benefiting from a quicker decision. The introduction of this service has no bearing on our editorial decision process – whether we accept, reject or request revisions – and we have worked closely with Research Square to be confident that their reviewer reports are as rigorous as we would expect from our own *Scientific Reports* reviewers."

Quaderi also drove home the point in her guest post that "Experimentation is key if we are to improve scholarly communications and support the researcher community, be they authors, reviewers, editorial board members or readers." Quaderi said they hoped the trial will provide useful feedback—in whatever form it takes.

Meanwhile, in an update, Bohannon reported that a commenter of his story and additional [editors](#) of *Scientific Reports* sent NPG a letter saying the announcement arose concern among them, because of the implications this introduction may have. They asked if the group could help them understand the meaning and implications of this move by considering some questions, which they [posed](#).

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