



ASSAf Statement on the Recognition of the Work of Editors and Peer Reviewers of Academic Journals and Books in South Africa

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Editing and peer review are the cornerstones upon which academic discourse thrives, enabling the dissemination of trustworthy knowledge and fostering scholarly advancement. The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) acknowledges the invaluable contributions of editors and reviewers whose commitment and proficiency are indispensable to upholding the quality and integrity of academic discourse. However, their contributions remain under-recognised within current academic reward mechanisms, presenting significant challenges for those engaged in editorial work (see ASSAf, 2006: viii, xxiii, xxviii, xxxi for when the issue was first raised).

Advanced research and its communication are essential in addressing national development imperatives. Scholars play an active, transformative role in caring for and developing the research environment and infrastructure. This is especially important given the historical exclusion of many talented individuals from opportunities to develop as researchers.

Central to the research enterprise is communication between peers. Scholarly journals and books, utilising robust peer review processes, serve as vital conduits for cultivating and expanding the body of knowledge. South Africa has achieved considerable success in encouraging academics to publish in recognised peer-reviewed journals and scholarly books, many of which are tailored to address the pressing challenges facing our nation, continent, and the world at large. There is much to celebrate.

Journal editors and reviewers are often employed by universities that apply performance appraisal systems. When it comes to research, these systems prioritise quantifiable publication outputs and the quantity of funds raised for research endeavours. Conversely, the crucial work of editing journals and scholarly books, peer reviewing, and investing time in developing the publishing skills of new generations of researchers, tends to remain under appreciated. Editors are sometimes discouraged by their institutions from this crucial service or even stigmatised because editing is alleged to be a personal indulgence. It is crucial to recognise that without quality journal and book editing (widely understood and inclusive of peer review) dissemination of new knowledge emanating from research would be severely compromised. Having been chosen to serve as an editor for reputable books and journals is also a sign of accomplishment and recognition for it.

The intrinsic rewards of editorial work offer a pathway to deeper understanding of the research environment. However, the often unremunerated, undervalued and hidden labour of journal and scholarly book editing discourages academics from doing not just



that type of work, but also peer reviewing for (especially local) journals and books. Partly, this reluctance stems from the institutional perception that such work — the lifeblood of maintaining scholarly credibility — conflicts with other demands on their time, such as publishing their own work, which is rewarded. Such an approach involves 'free-riding', taking advantage of others' labour that enables the peer review system to function, without contributing one's own. There is a moral obligation to contribute to a scheme from which one substantially and freely benefits.

It is critically important that university and science council administrators recognise and duly value the indispensable contributions made by editors and peer-reviewers. Only through such recognition and support can continued credibility and sustainability of our scholarly publishing ecosystem be ensured, thereby advancing our collective pursuit of sound, reliable knowledge and academic excellence.

Given these concerns, we make the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. Scholarly journals and scholarly books are crucial in advancing research, with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) providing subsidies to South African universities for published papers and books. High-quality and effective editing and peer review play a key role in maintaining academic standards. Editors contribute significantly to nurturing the next generation of researchers, while these publications offer substantial financial benefits through the DHET subsidy system.
2. Given that the reputation and standing of institutions is dependent on their scholarly output, it is vital that universities and science councils support editors, peer reviewers, and editorial board members by giving them appropriate recognition for their editorial duties, allowing them dedicated working time for their editorial duties, and by considering this work in performance appraisals.
3. Since editing and reviewing are essential in maintaining and building disciplines, generating and communicating new knowledge globally, and contributing to national (and international) development, these activities should explicitly form a component of academic reward systems.
4. To facilitate increased recognition, ASSAf has outlined best practices in editing and peer review (2018) and supports university and science council administrators in developing suitable benchmarks for the evaluation of work related to the production of scholarly journals and scholarly books. The process to date has already provided the following recommendations related to academic reward systems:
 - a. Editing, undertaking peer review, and serving on editorial boards should be recognised by allocating the activities to more important categories in performance appraisal.

- b. Academics should be encouraged to undertake the roles of editors and peer reviewers. New editors and peer reviewers should be trained in the roles.
 - c. Academics are urged to centre their performance motivation with reference to ASSAf's best practice guidelines (2018).
5. ASSAf recognises that this statement fits within a wider international context where research systems are under pressure and suggestions are being put forward as to how research should be evaluated (Centre for Science Futures, 2024).

References:

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