

# Peer review: good for all purposes?

March 2010

A guide for researchers

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Peer review is both a principle and a set of mechanisms at the heart of the arrangements for evaluating and assuring the quality of research. A new guide from the Research Information Network provides for researchers and others an outline of how the peer review system works, and highlights some of the challenges as well as the opportunities it faces in the internet age.



Peer review: A guide for researchers sets out the processes involved in peer review for both grant applications and publications. It also looks at the issues that have been raised in a series of recent reports on the costs of the system, and how effective and fair it is.




The growth in the size of the research community and of the volumes of research being undertaken in the UK and across the world means that the amount of time and effort put into the peer review system is growing too, and that it is coming under increasing scrutiny. The guide looks at how effective peer review is in selecting the best research proposals, as well as in detecting misconduct and malpractice.

Peer review: A guide for researchers is available at [www.rin.ac.uk/peer-review-guide](http://www.rin.ac.uk/peer-review-guide)

Hard copies are also available to distribute to colleagues and students, email [catherine.gray@rin.ac.uk](mailto:catherine.gray@rin.ac.uk)





The guide also looks at how fair the system is, and at the different levels of transparency involved in the process: from completely closed systems, where the identities of reviewers and those whose work is being reviewed are kept hidden from each other, and reports are not revealed, to completely transparent systems where identities and reports are openly revealed.

The burdens on researchers as submitters and reviewers are by far the biggest costs in the peer review system, and the guide outlines some of the measures that are being taken to reduce those burdens, or at least to keep them in check. A growing number of researchers are taking the view that they should be paid for the time they spend in reviewing grant applications and draft publications. But there are also concerns that such payment would significantly increase the costs of the system, and also of scholarly publications.

A RIN report in 2008 estimated that if reviewers were to be paid in cash for the

full economic costs of their time, then UK academic libraries would have to pay 45% more for their subscriptions to scholarly journals.

The internet has speeded up the process of peer review, and widened the pool of reviewers who can be drawn on. It has also provided new channels through which researchers can communicate their findings, and through which other researchers can comment on, annotate and evaluate them. These new opportunities bring new challenges as well.

The take-up of the opportunities for open comments, ratings and recommender systems has been patchy to date; and we currently lack clear protocols for the review of findings circulated in multiple formats, including blogs and wikis. The mechanisms for peer review will undoubtedly change in coming years, but the principle will remain central to all those involved in the research community.

## About the Research Information Network

The Research Information Network has been established by the higher education funding councils, the research councils, and the UK national libraries. We investigate how efficient and effective the information services provided for the UK research community are, how they are changing, and how they might be improved for the future. We help to ensure that researchers in the UK benefit from world-leading information services, so that they can sustain their position as among the most successful and productive researchers in the world. All of our publications are available on the website at [www.rin.ac.uk](http://www.rin.ac.uk)