

Concern raised over payment for fast-track peer review

Scientist resigns from NPG's *Scientific Reports* journal over pilot project.

Daniel Cressey

27 March 2015 | Clarified: [27 March 2015](#)

Some scientists are raising concerns over a pilot project that will allow researchers to pay for faster peer review in a journal owned by Nature Publishing Group (NPG). One member of the journal's editorial board has resigned in protest.

Since 24 March, biology papers submitted to *Scientific Reports* can be fast-tracked if authors make an additional payment, currently set at US\$750, with the journal promising to decide on the submission within three weeks.

Scientific Reports works on the open-access model, in which a journal's content is entirely accessible for free. Open-access journals therefore have no revenue from subscriptions. Some journals instead charge authors a fee to publish their papers. *Scientific Reports* charges \$1,495 to publish an article.

Mark Maslin, a climatologist at University College London (UCL) who is one of thousands of volunteer editors on the journal, announced on Twitter on 26 March that he had resigned from the editorial advisory panel as a result of the fast-track project. This sparked a number of other academics to weigh in on the issue, many opposing the pilot trial.

"It's clearly touched a nerve in academia," says Maslin. He believes that the policy could split poorly funded researchers and their richer colleagues into separate publishing routes: "I think it is setting up a two-tier system."

NPG, which is headquartered in London, owns both *Scientific Reports* and *Nature*, but the two journals are editorially independent. In a statement, NPG said: "One Editorial Board Member has resigned. We are in discussions with him to ensure that we fully understand his concerns and that we have clearly communicated why we are undertaking this pilot and the benefits that we think it may offer researchers."

Peer-review bottleneck

Explaining the rationale behind the project, NPG said that a survey of its authors in 2014 found that 70% were frustrated with the time peer review took and 67% thought publishers should experiment with alternative peer-review methods.

"Nature Publishing Group has scientists at the heart of what we do, whether they be authors, peer-reviewers or users of the research we publish, and we are continually experimenting with different innovations in the publishing process," says the statement. "This is a small pilot to see if a fast-track peer-review service is something that authors and reviewers would find useful."

NPG is partnering with Research Square, a company in Durham, North Carolina, to deliver the fast-track system. Research Square offers [author services such as independent peer review and manuscript preparation assistance](#).

Trial period

The *Scientific Reports* service is currently being run on a trial basis. Nandita Quaderi, NPG's publishing director of Open Research, said in a statement to the journal's editorial board that: "This trial will not affect our usual service or processing of non-fast-track papers in any way." Quaderi's statement adds, "fast-track decisions will be made by in-house editors according to *Scientific Reports* standard publishing criteria."

Georgina Mace, director of the UCL Centre for Biodiversity and Environment Research and a member of the editorial advisory panel at *Scientific Reports*, says: "I worry about it in terms of the outcome it would have. In some areas of science, people have access to money they can use for that sort of thing and other areas don't."

In journals with limited capacity for how many papers they can publish, well-resourced disciplines or groups of researchers could over time potentially disadvantage those colleagues who are less well off, she says, if they pay for their papers to effectively jump the queue to publication.

When people read a journal, “what they’re hoping is to get the pick of the best science that is produced. I do worry about this two-tier thing,” she says.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2015.17204

Clarifications

Clarified: This story originally did not make it clear that the number of volunteer editors working on *Scientific Reports* is in the thousands. The text has been adjusted to remove this ambiguity.