

## Start-up story

# Publons: releasing the untapped power of peer review for universities

### Keywords

Peer review; Publons; institutions; libraries; research office

The role the university library plays in today's highly competitive, digital environment has never been more important. Librarians work with faculty at all levels to provide the resources they need for research to flourish, and to help the university maintain its teaching and research excellence. But over the past few decades there has been a profound change in the way university libraries operate to achieve these goals. It used to be that librarians introduced researchers to the different types of resources available. In more recent years, however, their role has been subject to a rapid pace of change. The new skill set now required of academic librarians is becoming aligned with that of dedicated research support, and institutional strategic goals more typically associated with research offices.<sup>1</sup> Now, rather than simply introduce the different types of resources, librarians must also sift through all the information and platforms available and narrow it down to the most applicable – for research and, ultimately, for funding.<sup>2</sup>

With funding budgets decreasing and universities in the UK falling in the prestigious QS rankings,<sup>3</sup> researchers need to prove they are contributing to their profession more broadly. It is no longer enough for researchers just to be doing research: funding organizations are looking for new indicators, beyond publication data, to identify the up-and-coming experts in breakthrough science.

The only way for universities to stay competitive is to adapt to this change of culture. Academic librarians need to help find and utilize the platforms that showcase *all* of their researchers' outputs. This will not only boost the researchers' profiles (and, by extension, that of the university), but will also demonstrate their commitment to supporting early career researchers in activities that extend beyond the publication of their research.

### New evidence of research output and peer esteem

Publons<sup>4</sup> was established in 2012 by Andrew Preston and Daniel Johnston as a free service to help researchers keep a verified record of their previously hidden peer-review activity.

It is a unique cross-publisher platform that collects the world's peer-review activity, providing (at the time of writing in early 2018) over 300,000 academics with verified records of their reviewing contributions across all journals. These academics hail from all corners of the globe, with researchers in Europe and the US showing the highest levels of engagement.



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PENELOPE DOWN

Account Manager  
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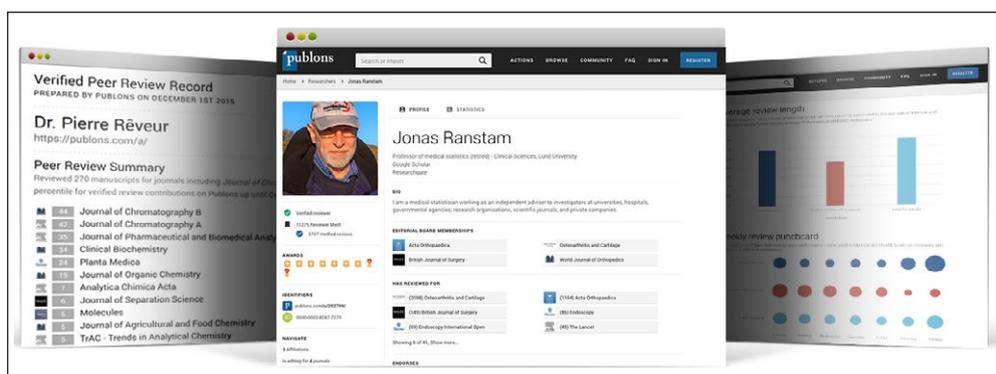


Figure 1. A researcher's verified record, public reviewer profile and statistics page on Publons.com

Researchers can:

- effortlessly track all their peer review and editorial contributions to research through their global reviewer profile (see Figure 1)
- volunteer to review for any of Publons' partner journals and connect with editors looking for reviewers
- access their personal reviewer statistics and downloadable, verified review record to add to their CV as evidence of their service and standing in their field
- learn and practise how to review while building out their profile as a qualified peer reviewer via the Publons Academy – free online peer-review training.

Peer review is central to our ability to trust scientific research, but it has been an unreported research output. It has traditionally been performed in silos and behind closed doors, concealing an expert's full output and impact; Publons' reviewer recognition service changes that by providing verified evidence of this once-hidden activity. Reviewers like Amanda Salis, a health professor at the University of Sydney, leverage these data to use in grant, fellowship, promotion, tenure and Green Card applications. In 2017, for example, Salis included her Publons Verified Record and the Publons Peer Review Awards<sup>5</sup> that she had received on the network in her promotion and senior fellowship applications.<sup>6</sup> Both applications were successful, which Salis in part credits to the change in research culture and the new criteria by which researchers are judged, as well as insight from peer review in general.

Salis says, 'I have learned what gets accepted for publication, and what does not. This insight from peer review has helped me to plan research that got funded by nationally competitive project grants, and to publish the findings, both of which contributed to my successful fellowship and promotion applications, where two of the main currencies are grant income and influential publications.'

## Using peer review to improve and promote research excellence

In June 2017 Publons was acquired by Clarivate Analytics,<sup>7</sup> a global objective data-driven research solutions provider. The scale and reach of Clarivate combined with Publons' large reviewer network is a powerful force: one that will be able to increase trust and efficiency in the world of research, and offer researchers, publishers, research funders and institutions better insight into review and editorial workloads.

According to Publons' database of over 325,000 reviewers and 1.7 million reviews, a researcher can review on average between three to ten papers a year. The 2016 Publishing Research Consortium survey calculated that researchers spend an average of five hours reviewing each manuscript they accept.<sup>8</sup> That means, for an institution with 500 researchers, between 937 to 3,125 working days of critical time, effort and expertise goes unreported. Publons helps universities leverage that untapped research output in order to measure, improve and promote their faculty's influence in their field.

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3 Universities who partner with Publons gain access to their own customized, contextualized and verified peer-review reports. These capture the quantity of peer review their researchers are already doing, and the breadth and quality of the journals they are working for. Universities can also see who their researchers are connecting with as reviewers and editors worldwide, and use that data to strengthen their international ties with top funding bodies, journals and research institutes. Some partners use an API to pull data from Publons directly into their current research information systems (CRIS) to populate their own records with Publons data.

Further, universities are provided with bespoke support and marketing to drive institution-wide uptake and ensure they get the full picture of their faculty's reviewing and editorial output. (See Figure 2.)

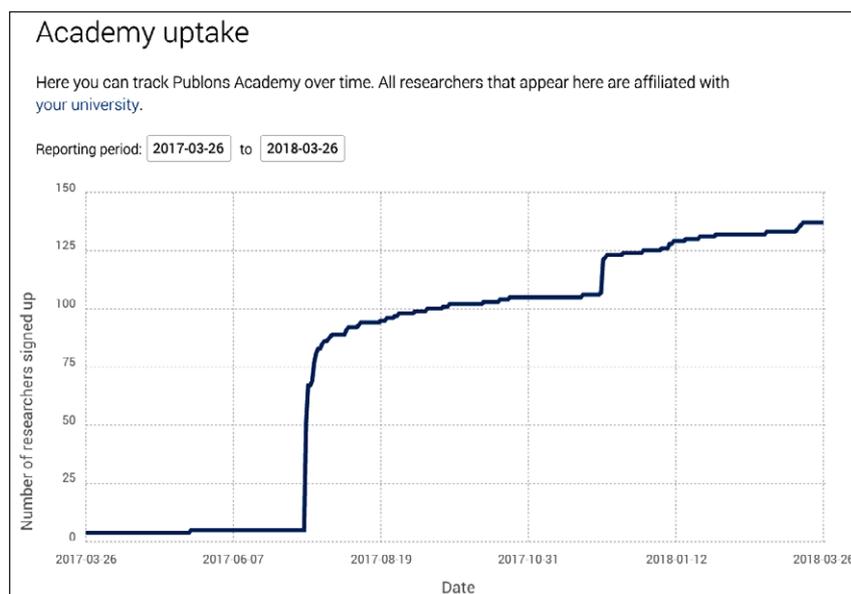


Figure 2. Screenshot of Institution Dashboard

Institutions like Victoria University of Wellington (Victoria) and the University of Queensland (UQ) are already using their reviewer reports to strengthen and inform external researcher assessments and internal resource allocation, and to ensure quick and strategic decision-making.<sup>9</sup>

Victoria recently partnered with Publons to ensure better review and research outcomes for students and staff across its entire research community.<sup>10</sup> Part of this included helping its faculty strengthen their researcher summaries for the Performance-Based Research Fund,<sup>11</sup> which allocates public funding in the tertiary education sector. Publons provided review and editorial summaries of Victoria's researchers on Publons to showcase a comprehensive view of their output and expertise, and improve Victoria's chances of securing funding in a competitive environment.

UQ was also an early adopter of Publons. It used metrics such as publications and citation counts to provide information about research quality, impact and significance, but knew its researchers were contributing to their community in other ways that had not been captured or measured effectively in the past. Added to that, The Australian Research Council's Excellence in Research for Australia was already asking for data on 'non-traditional research outputs'.<sup>12</sup> UQ recognized that as a call to provide new evidence of their researchers' engagement within the scholarly community. Andrew Heath, who works within the Library's Scholarly Communication and Repository Services, and connects to Publons' API for a direct feed of data, says, 'There were already a number of UQ researchers independently using Publons to track their own peer review activity, so it was an easy decision to approach them to help build a picture of the institution's peer review work.'

## 4 Better reviewers make better researchers

Publons also grows and upskills academics across all levels with peer review training.

The Publons Academy<sup>13</sup> is the pre-eminent peer review training course that equips all researchers with the skills and connections they need to master peer review and impress journal editors.

Developed together with world-renowned researchers, peer reviewers, journal editors and Nobel Prize winners, the Publons Academy (see Figure 3) provides researchers with a platform to practise and demonstrate their reviewing expertise, and connect them with the editors who need to grow their reviewer pools.

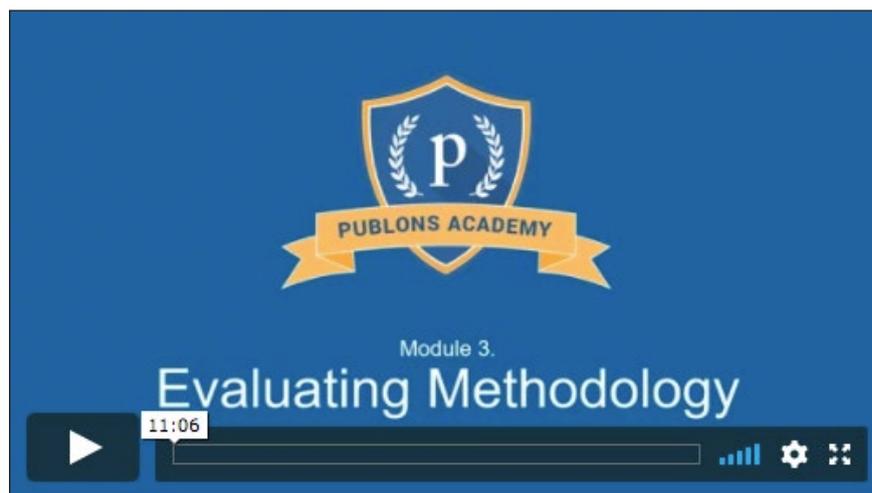


Figure 3. An example of a Publons Academy module: Evaluating Methodology

Partner institutions receive an all-access, custom-branded version of the Publons Academy. This offers students:

- ten modules covering the core competencies and skills of peer review
- practice writing real post-publication reviews under the guidance of their supervisor
- an endorsement by their supervisor as a subject-matter expert ready for pre-publication reviews
- the chance to build a well-rounded reviewer profile on Publons where editors can read their practice reviews
- a featured appearance on the Journal Dashboard for partner journals in their field, allowing editors to access a growing pool of eager, new expert reviewers.

Universities that partner with Publons benefit from supplemented researcher development programmes and a reduction in the teaching and administrative burden for senior staff, as well as having their researchers' expertise and activity in their field promoted.

The Publons Academy also helps academics enhance their writing and researching skills, which gives them a better chance of getting their own novel ideas through review.

## Peer review is at the heart of research

Peer review is an old system, begun in the 18th century by the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*,<sup>14</sup> but it still lies at the heart of research. Its importance extends beyond the quality and credibility it brings to scholarly communication.

Peer review demonstrates that experts are contributing to research beyond their own academic articles. It is time for this work to get the recognition it deserves, and academic librarians have the power to drive this forward. They can leverage the hard work researchers

5 are already doing to enhance their profile, and to show their institution is at the forefront of a significant change: one that pays greater attention to research outputs that bring about better research outcomes, such as peer review.

#### Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

#### Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests and have noted that they are employees of Publons.

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