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Editorial

Demystifying peer reviewing: Building capacity, capability and community in project scholarship

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1. Introduction

Peer review remains a cornerstone of academic publishing, ensuring rigour, relevance, and integrity of scholarly work. It is a conversation among authors, reviewers (peers), and editors, aimed at developing the best possible contributions for publication in a specific journal (Patriotta, 2017). Reviewers play a dual role: they are both gatekeepers of publication quality (Söderlund et al., 2025) and active contributors in shaping the intellectual community (Campbell & Conlon, 2021).

In this editorial, we offer an additional perspective that also serves as an opportunity to grow capability, capacity, and community to demystify academic publishing. Strengthening the reviewing culture in this way will allow early-career scholars and those on the periphery of a field to develop competencies not only to serve as reviewers but also to produce more rigorous research, write better papers in the future, and become part of a research community. Authors and reviewers are often drawn from the same research communities, thereby creating a tight network of contributors wearing complementary but sometimes conflicting hats as authors, reviewers, editors on the one side and readers on the other. We argue that greater diversity in the reviewer pool enables innovation and growth while carefully maintaining quality standards.

Project management in its core is a relatively small academic field, a community that has traditionally grown through internal networks, often via PhD supervision, co-authorship and participation in academic conferences organised by networks and academic associations such as IRNOP (International Research Network on Organizing by Projects), EURAM (European Academy of Management), and BAM (British Academy of Management). While effective in maintaining continuity, this can inadvertently limit capacity and diversity, hindering the integration of fresh perspectives from scholars in adjacent communities and disciplines who are welcome to publish in the International Journal of Project Management (IJPM).

Project Management as a vibrant, dynamic and evolving field engages with other fields such as Organizational Behaviour, Organization Theory, Human Resource Management, Strategy, Innovation, Change Management, and Entrepreneurship, and other disciplines like Infrastructure, (Information) Technology, Engineering, Urban Development, and Construction Management (Huemann, 2022; Locatelli et al., 2023). As the Project Management field is growing, it increasingly requires expansion of capacity and capabilities to ensure new ideas, look outward and inward, and balance rigour and relevance (Meredith, 2022; Unterhitzberger, 2023; Unterhitzberger et al., 2024).

This editorial has three goals. First, we discuss reviewing as capacity, capability and community building. Second, we introduce practical experiences from the recent IJPM Reviewer Development Programme. Finally, this editorial offers concluding reflections to drive the development of a more inclusive and developmental review culture.

2. Reviewer development for capacity, capability and community building

As part of scientific journals' publication processes, the reviewers' task is to read submitted research papers, assess their suitability to become published in a particular journal, offer constructive feedback to authors to help authors to develop their papers the research, and support editors in making justified decisions on the readiness of the paper for publication and necessary developments. The inherent character of reviewing is that the reviewers are peers, that is, other project scholars who conduct research in a similar or related topic.

Reviewing acts as a mechanism to convey academic conventions and standards in the field (Patriotta, 2017) and advance knowledge, thereby building trust among the community members (Campbell & Conlon, 2021). In addition, reviewing offers a unique opportunity to develop the skills of new scholars (Thatcher, 2023). It allows them to engage with

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the field's expectations, theoretical frameworks, and ongoing conversations. Reviewing can also be a mechanism for inclusion, welcoming outsiders and newcomers and ensuring that the field remains open to new voices and innovation. By encouraging participation from scholars with diverse backgrounds, we foster a richer and more dynamic intellectual environment. Through reviewing, early-career scholar and scholars from other domains can begin participating in the dialogue in project scholarship, eventually contributing as authors. This process of socialisation is essential for sustaining and expanding the community.

Reviewing a scientific research paper generally requires a variety of capabilities from the scholars who engage in peer review. To begin with, it is necessary to understand the journal's editorial scope and style to offer reviews that align with the journal's style and ongoing conversations. Generally, there is a need to adhere to the requirements of constructive and developmental reviewing (Söderlund et al., 2025), in which feedback is written comprehensively, covers both positive and critical remarks, and offers helpful suggestions to the authors in an understandable way. Reviewers need to be knowledgeable in the research field and bring the ability to assess:

- topicality, relevance of the research
- literature, positioning of the paper
- alternative theories, usefulness and conceptualisation
- research methodology and process
- quality of research results
- novelty of research contribution

In the latter phases of reviews, there is also a need to pay attention to (technical) details, detect detailed errors and correction needs, and identify whether and how the earlier feedback has been used, and whether issues raised earlier in the review process have been solved.

Early-career scholars typically learn to review through a mixture of receiving reviews on their own work, observing their supervisors, participating in internal review rehearsals, and reading editorials that offer guidance (Aguinis et al., 2018; Campbell & Conlon, 2021; Carpenter, 2009; Lepak, 2009; Verbeke et al., 2017). While these informal pathways are valuable, they are also uneven. Opportunities depend on local networks, supervisory support, and timing, meaning that many emerging scholars lack consistent or accessible routes into reviewing. This poses challenges for an individual reviewer as well as for a journal: it limits the **capacity** of the reviewer pool, creates variability in reviewing **capability**, and can reinforce barriers to joining the scholarly **community**.

To address this challenge and support the development of new reviewers in a clear and transparent manner, we intentionally articulated a set of principles to guide the design of the IJPM Reviewer Development Programme. These principles reflect our understanding of reviewing as both an academic responsibility and a community-building practice.

3. Guiding principles for building reviewer capacity, capability and community

We saw the need to develop the IJPM Reviewer Development Programme to operationalise our idea of capacity, capability and community building through reviews. We had four main principles in mind.

First, in our view, peer review is and should represent **responsible project scholarship**. Drawing on the responsible research principles summarised in Unterhitzberger et al. (2024), this includes valuing both basic and applied contributions, encouraging plurality and interdisciplinarity, and supporting sound methodological practice. These commitments carry implications for reviewing. Reviewers help ensure that submissions representing different forms of inquiry—whether conceptual, empirical, qualitative, quantitative, interdisciplinary—are treated with fairness and respect. They also contribute to maintaining high methodological standards by identifying when methods require clarification or strengthening, while remembering that not all valuable

contributions follow the same conventions. In this sense, responsible reviewing supports a field that is plural, rigorous, and open to diverse scholarly traditions. Responsible reviewing emphasises inclusion, epistemic respect, and constructive dialogue (Krlev & Spicer, 2023), recognising that reviewers play an active role in strengthening the field rather than simply gatekeeping.

Second, we rely on the expertise of project scholars and see **reviewing as reciprocal**. Because peer reviewing is voluntary, we rely on authors' willingness to reciprocate what they receive. This means that authors who would want to get their papers published in a journal should at the same time be willing to review others' papers for that journal. This logic echoes the argument made by Campbell and Conlon (2021), who emphasise that publishing is a collective endeavour and that "it takes a village" to craft a strong paper. Reviewing is part of the broader service work that keeps the scholarly community functioning. Although such service is often invisible and rarely rewarded directly, it plays a crucial role in maintaining standards, shaping manuscripts and supporting authors' development. Saying "yes" to review requests, especially early in one's career, is therefore not only a contribution to the field but also a pathway into its conversations and networks.

Third, we want to advocate for and support the **development of review quality**, which implies that good reviews will help authors develop better-quality papers and, thereby, promote scientific progress in the field of project management. Becoming a good reviewer requires experience and repetition (Verbeke et al., 2017), and support. We have experienced it as important to support the development new members into the reviewer base so that they have at least rehearsed reviewing and received some guiding feedback on their reviews, thereby initiating a positive developmental trajectory in review capabilities. Journals can get new reviewers among the aspiring authors, especially when their first papers are published and sometimes also through volunteer registrations.

Fourth, we want to **demystify the review process** by making visible what happens in ordinary review processes and informing early-career scholars and aspiring authors about good practices. Offering guidance and support to early-career scholars' first reviews and supporting them in that process not only transfers tacit knowledge about reviewing to them but also helps them understand the uncertainties and challenges for authors, when submitting papers. By growing capacity and capability as reviewers, we will also grow capacity and capability as authors.

Guided by these principles, we designed and implemented the IJPM Reviewer Development Programme. Its purpose was to translate these principles into concrete practices through structured training, mentorship, and real-time reviewing experience.

4. The IJPM reviewer development programme

The IJPM Reviewer Development Programme was launched in 2024, inspired by the Academy of Management Review Bridge Reviewer Programme (Thatcher, 2023). To get an in-depth understanding and first-hand experience of how Academy of Management Review supports reviewer development, the first author took part in the Bridge Reviewer Programme. Informed by these insights and experience, we developed our own model, building on existing good practice while catering to the specific strengths and needs of the project scholar community.

We recognised that many potential reviewers lacked training and that this gap could be addressed through mentorship and guided practice. The programme was designed to respond to the increasing volume of submissions and the corresponding demand for high-quality reviews and qualified reviewers. By investing in reviewer development, we aimed to ensure that IJPM could maintain and raise its high scholarly standards while promoting diversity and expanding its reach.

The goal was to create a structured, comprehensive development pathway that would not only enhance review quality but also foster community engagement and scholarly growth in our field, and provide a clear, accessible pathway for becoming a regular reviewer of IJPM.

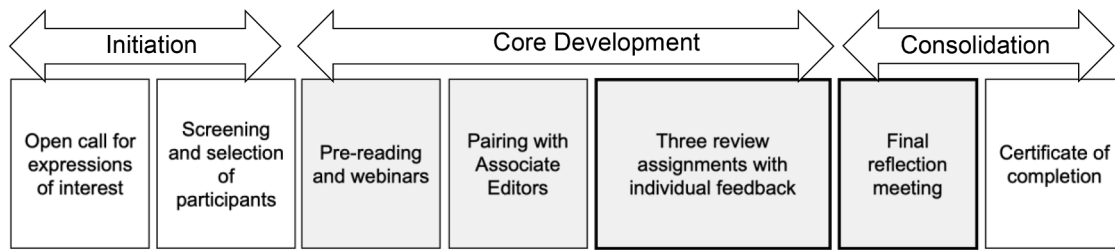


Fig. 1. Phases and activities in the IJPM Reviewer Development Programme.

Fig. 1 offers an overview of the Reviewer Development Programme phases.

Through an open call, we received about 100 applications and selected 40 early-career scholars (typically advanced PhD students/candidates). Applicants were selected based on their experience, interests and academic background and must have published at least one academic Project Management publication in one of the field's core journals or a neighbouring discipline. We kept the geographical background in mind to ensure diversity. The cohort was a sizeable but diverse group, spanning a broad range of backgrounds, perspectives, and geographies.

We provided a reading list and encouraged the trainees to familiarise themselves with the standards IJPM papers are expected to meet (Huemann & Martinsuo, 2020; Huemann & Pesämaa, 2022; Martinsuo & Huemann, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Zerjav et al., 2023; Gregor & Zwikael, 2024). To ensure participants in different time zones were included, we arranged two interactive webinar sessions covering the main points of the IJPM reviewing process, expectations for participation, and the prerequisites for the programme.

Each trainee was then paired with an Associate Editor based on the match of the trainee's interests with their area of expertise. Editors took care of four to six trainees each, assigned review tasks, and offered personalised feedback to support their further development.

Upon successful completion of the three assignments, Editors arranged a final reflection with each trainee to summarize the main learning points, provide clarifications and to conclude the reviewer development experience. Trainees who received their certificates of completion are listed as reviewer programme graduates, with the aim of becoming regular reviewers for IJPM and eventually being accepted into the Editorial Reviewer Board.

While the programme has three distinct phases: initiation, core development, and consolidation, as shown in Fig. 1, the overall duration of the programme varied (18 –24 months), given the pace of submissions coming through the pipeline and the match with the trainee's profile.

5. Learning pathways

Reviews were completed through the journal's established system. Based on the quality of a review, Editors either included the reviewer's report in the feedback to the authors or excluded it if the review did not yet meet the expected quality standard. Editors, moreover, offered concrete feedback to their trainees to both recognise strengths of the review and identify potential areas for improvement. This allocation process and method established the basis for the personalised "on the job" development.

Review assignments were selected directly from the pipeline of submissions to IJPM, contributing to the realism of the process and keeping the learning experience aligned with the structure, flow, and timeline of the IJPM review process. As trainees were integrated into the regular process, the decision letter shared with all reviewers was also shared with them. This served as a reflective device, allowing the trainee to gain insight into how their review compared to other, more experienced reviewers and how the editorial decision is formed based on

review reports.

This sequence was repeated three times, as visualised in Fig. 2. Where possible, assignments vary in the type of review (as either a review sequence for the same article submission or for different article submissions). In this way, trainees worked on their review reports, engaged with the Editor's feedback on their review, reflected on their work in relation to other reviews provided and obtained insight from the editorial decision letter.

An additional component of the Reviewer Development Programme was the final reflection. Where possible the Editor held a meeting with their trainee to summarize learning and clarify further steps to support the transition from guided reviewing to autonomous reviewing. Reflections covered topics like

- review process and the trainee's overall experience
- discussion of what the trainee may not have emphasised in their reviews that other reviewers or the Editor highlighted
- key lessons the trainee intended to carry forward into future reviewing and authorship practice

The following three brief vignettes, based on anonymised meeting notes, illustrate typical learning patterns across the cohort.

Vignette 1. One trainee described the programme as a highly supportive entry into reviewing. They noted that comparing their own reports with those of more experienced reviewers helped them understand how developmental suggestions are constructed and how theoretical contributions are evaluated. Through this process, they developed a stronger sense of methodological rigour and a clearer view of the responsibilities that reviewers carry in supporting research integrity. The experience not only strengthened their reviewing practice but also improved their confidence in reading and developing academic papers, motivating them to continue reviewing more regularly.

Vignette 2. Another trainee explained that the programme had been extremely helpful in clarifying both the expectations of IJPM and the broader norms of developmental reviewing. Observing how other reviewers framed their feedback helped them identify where their own reports could be made more rigorous and constructive. They felt that the programme expanded their understanding of IJPM's editorial standards and improved their ability to deliver structured and development-oriented reviews. They found the webinars and the final reflection meeting particularly valuable for consolidating these insights.

Vignette 3. A third trainee highlighted how the programme broadened their methodological awareness and sharpened their theoretical reasoning. With a background primarily in one methodological tradition, they valued the opportunity to observe reviews on manuscripts using different approaches, which helped them calibrate their assessments and better understand expectations across methods. They also appreciated seeing editorial decision letters, which revealed how multiple reviewer perspectives are synthesised. The personalised feedback received throughout the process—especially during the final reflection meeting—helped them refine both their reviewing and their own writing practice, reinforcing their readiness to contribute as a member of the journal's reviewer community.

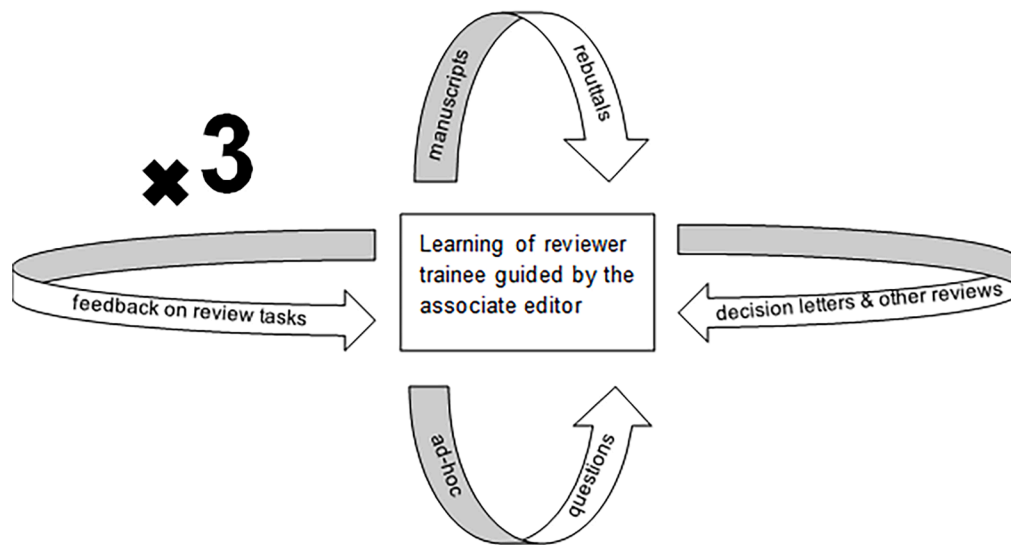


Fig. 2. Learning pathways for the trainee reviewers.

6. Reflections and conclusion: building capacity, capability and community

By February 2026, 20 participants have completed the programme, with the remaining cohort still progressing. Across the cohort, trainees reported significant learning: increased confidence in their ability to review, greater clarity about IJPM's expectations, and a deeper understanding of the field's theoretical and methodological conversations. These outcomes suggest that structured editorial guidance can accelerate the development of reviewing capability more effectively than informal or ad-hoc learning. The real-time and hands-on nature of the programme was central to this development. Trainees engaged directly with IJPM's expectations of reviewers; observed the nuances of scholarly dialogue across manuscripts and editorial decisions; strengthened their critical evaluation skills; and gained insight into how reviewers, authors, and editors interact in shaping published knowledge. This demystified aspects of the review process that often remain opaque until scholars experience them repeatedly.

Overall, the IJPM Reviewer Development Programme expanded the journal's reviewer pool, leading to improved review quality and strengthened editorial processes over time. These are valuable achievements for the journal, even though the time and effort required by the editorial team were significant. This brings us to some of the programme's challenges. The most significant of these was the unpredictability of the submissions pipeline, which limited our ability to match manuscripts to trainees' specific areas of expertise. As a result, the programme duration varied across participants. Nonetheless, retaining a realistic process—by assigning manuscripts from the live pipeline—was important for providing trainees with the experience most similar to what they are likely to experience in a regular review cycle. This experience highlighted the broader point that reviewer development requires both flexibility and patience. The pace of incoming submissions, the fit between manuscripts and reviewer expertise, and the rhythm of editorial work all shape what is possible. A key lesson for us was that supporting new reviewers means not only offering guidance but also integrating their development into the existing structures and constraints of journal work. Amongst other things, this is part of the idea of reviewing as a shared responsibility across the academic community (Söderlund et al. 2025).

These reflections bring us back to the main themes of this editorial: **capacity, capability and community**.

- First, the programme contributed to **capacity** by increasing the number and diversity of reviewers familiar with IJPM's expectations. As submissions continue to grow and the field expands into new theoretical and empirical territories, sustaining adequate reviewing capacity becomes essential. A broad reviewer base helps manage workloads and brings a wider range of perspectives into the evaluation process.
- Second, the programme supported **capability** by helping reviewers develop a clearer sense of what makes feedback useful and constructive. Trainees learned to articulate contributions, engage with theory, and communicate suggestions in a developmental manner—qualities consistently emphasised in the literature on effective peer review (Campbell & Conlon, 2021; Söderlund et al., 2025). Some trainees also reported that learning to review improved their writing and their ability to navigate revision processes, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between reviewing and authoring.
- Third, the programme strengthened the **community** by engaging early-career scholars as welcome participants in IJPM's conversations. Several trainees highlighted that being invited into the reviewer pool increased their sense of belonging in the field and helped them see reviewing not only as a task but as a shared academic practice. This aligns with broader calls for more humane and inclusive academic cultures that recognise the pressures scholars face and the value of supportive professional relationships (Korica, 2022; Krlev & Spicer, 2023; Tekeste, 2025). A respectful reviewing culture is foundational to this work.

These broader reflections point to some practical implications. Reviewer development appears to benefit from authentic tasks, feedback that helps calibrate and align judgment with more experienced reviewers, and opportunities for reflection on both strengths and areas for improvement. It also benefits from a tone and ethos that emphasise developmental engagement rather than gatekeeping. Reviewing can be demanding—especially for early-career scholars navigating competing pressures (Tekeste, 2025)—but it can also be a valuable part of scholarly growth if approached with the right expectations and support.

Finally, reviewing is not isolated from authorship. Many trainees observed that understanding the reviewing process helped them approach their own writing and revising with greater confidence. This suggests that reviewer development programmes may have positive spillover effects on the quality of new paper submissions, thereby contributing not only to the journal's operations but also to the field's intellectual development.

For IJPM, the Reviewer Development Programme is therefore more than a training initiative. It is part of our ongoing effort to invest in the journal's scholarly community in a practical, grounded way. By building capacity, strengthening capability, and nurturing community, we hope to contribute to a reviewing culture that is fair, constructive and sustainable. Our aim is that programme graduates become valued contributors to IJPM's reviewer pool and, over time, confident authors and colleagues who help uphold the standards and spirit of project scholarship. We see this as steady, incremental work—carried out one manuscript, one review, and one conversation at a time.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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