From submission to success

Peer review in fellowship and promotion applications

Publons puts the spotlight on obesity researcher, Professor Amanda Salis (publishing as Amanda Sainsbury, The University of Sydney). Amanda's research aims to help people with excess weight to safely attain and maintain an optimum body weight – and she was recently rewarded for it. Upon receiving a top promotion and Senior Research Fellowship, Amanda explains how her peer review contributions guided her as a researcher, and helped her stand out as a successful applicant.

Prof. Amanda Salis

NHMRC Senior Research Fellow - The Boden Institute of Obesity, Nutrition, Exercise & Eating Disorders, University of Sydney

Can you tell us a bit about your new fellowship and promotion, and what this means for your research?

The fellowship is a Senior Research Fellowship from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) of Australia. It allows me to do full-time research for the next 5 years, which I am delighted about. This will enable me to complete the long-term clinical trials of dietary obesity treatments that people in my team and I have started, and to undertake the next phase of my research, which is implementation of our findings into clinical practice around the world. My promotion from Associate Professor to Professor will help with this mission, because the title of Professor gives great kudos, and this will facilitate ongoing growth of my international collaborations and translation of my team's research findings internationally.
How do you feel your peer review activity contributed towards your successful applications?

My peer review activities have taught me a lot about how to conduct and publish high-quality and high impact research in my field. By peer reviewing literally hundreds of manuscripts submitted for publication in my field and related fields over my career, and by subsequently reading the reports of the other peer reviewers (which most – but not all – journals are kind enough to send to all of the peer reviewers for each manuscript), 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.

Why did you decide to include your peer review activity in your applications?

I have observed a change of culture at the NHMRC and at research institutes in the past 5-10 years that has encouraged the addition of peer review activity to research applications. It is no longer enough to just be doing great research; you also need to demonstrate that you are contributing to your profession more broadly. Peer review is an important means by which researchers can contribute to the growth of their profession, and demonstrating that you have done a certain amount of peer review (via a verifiable means such as Publons) proves that you are indeed making contributions to the greater good of research. This is an excellent change in research culture and the criteria by which researchers are judged, because it encourages more researchers to contribute to their research field more broadly. This is needed to ensure high quality research worldwide.

What about your Publons Peer Review Awards? Why did you think they would be a good fit for your applications?

Prizes – especially international prizes – are highly regarded by fellowship selection or promotion panels. With research funding becoming increasingly difficult to secure in the light of budget squeezes, and with the quality of applications increasing all the time, a competitive prize is perceived as showing that you have done something that must have been better than what other people have done. While I can’t say for sure whether or not my Publons awards helped with the successful outcome of my applications in 2017, I can say that colleagues who pre-reviewed my draft fellowship and promotion applications prior to submission and success wrote notes such as ‘wow!’ or ‘great!’ alongside those international awards from Publons on my applications.

What was involved in the fellowship application process and how did you tie your peer review activity into that (in which sections etc)?

In my NHMRC Senior Research Fellowship application, I mentioned the award in 3 different ways throughout the written application:

Executive summary: "I have served on 9 national grant review panels (including 3 NHMRC panels) and reviewed 188 manuscripts and inter/national grants since 2012, winning international recognition from Publons.com for being in the world’s top 10% of peer reviewers in Medicine."

Table listing all of my awards: “Sentinels of Science Award - honouring the highest achievers in peer review across the world’s journals. Awarded by Publons.com for being one of the top 10 per cent of researchers contributing to peer review in the field of Medicine, 2016.”
My contributions to my field of research:” My involvement in journal peer review (144 articles since 2012) has been recognized internationally by Publons.com, via a Sentinels of Science Award for being in the world’s top 10% of peer reviewers in Medicine.”

What about the promotion application? How did you include your peer review activity into that?

The application for promotion to Professor was an extremely long process. It involved a written application in April, then two 500-word written CV updates (one in July, the other in November), plus a face-to-face interview in July.

Here is what I wrote about my Publons award in my initial written application for promotion to Professor, which I included in the executive summary and also repeated in a section on ‘Governance, Leadership and Engagement’ outlining service to my profession: “My extensive involvement in journal peer review (144 articles since 2012) has been recognized internationally by Publons.com, via a Sentinels of Science Award for being in the world’s top 10% of peer reviewers in Medicine in 2016.”

I also mentioned my 2017 Peer Review Award in an “International Prizes” section of my November CV update.

Would you encourage other researchers to include their peer review activity into similar applications?

I would encourage other researchers to engage actively in peer review in order to learn more about their field and related fields themselves, and in order to contribute to their profession. I think that some researchers shy away from doing peer review, feeling that they are not sufficiently qualified in the field, or feeling that it takes too much time. However, everyone who has written and rebutted peer reviewed articles themselves is qualified to undertake peer review (with appropriate guidance for their first one or two peer review reports), and it gets much faster the more you do.

I would also encourage other researchers to keep an accurate count of all their peer review activities (Publons makes that so easy to do, as well as being verifiable). Those verifiable numbers should be included in applications for funding or promotion. People who review applications from researchers tend to be researchers themselves, and researchers prefer to see NUMBERS and PROOF in place of empty rhetoric. So saying something like “In the past 5 years I have peer reviewed 144 manuscripts for international journals, including Journal X and Journal Y” is much better than saying "I am a sought-after peer reviewer, having peer reviewed extensively in my field.”

Anything else you would like to add? Any tips for other researchers applying for fellowships or promotions etc?

In my experience, fellowship and promotion applications take a long time to write (about a month full-time for each), and I have needed to plan strategically for them for several years in advance. Having mentors from whom I have been able to ask advice over the years has been important for me, as has getting numerous other researchers to read my draft applications and revised versions well in advance of the application due date.

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.

Congratulations Amanda and thank you for taking the time to share your experience with us.

If you have a story you want to share with the Publons community like Amanda, we’d love to hear from you.

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