Making an impact beyond academia is all dependent on activities or processes that make new research findings accessible to other actors. Research published in a scientific paper or presented at academic conferences sometimes finds its way to stakeholders outside academia, typically when there is an ability to pick up such information. However, to reach out there is often a need to present research results in other formats. The question is: to what extent has the research community a responsibility to make sure that new knowledge reach wider audiences?

‘Systems perspectives on...’ is a series of e-books that by a cross-disciplinary effort examines future technologies and their importance to society. At the same time it is a platform for learning about environmental impact of separate technologies, how different solutions fit into larger technological and economic systems, and what political means are necessary for stimulating technological progress. The series now comprises three books covering systems perspective on Renewable Power, Electromobility and Biorefineries. The professor in environmental systems analysis at Chalmers and chief editor for the e-book series, Björn Sandén states:

“It is a great source of information for professionals in industry and civil servants who work with these issues”

Always up to date

Björn Sandén often participates in different media to debate the pros and cons of future technologies and their importance to society. At Chalmers’ website Björn Sandén introduces the e-book series with: “The energy and climate challenge is enormous and the world is running full speed ahead into a very uncertain future. The role of technology is ambiguous: definitely part of the problem, but as surely, a necessary element of any transition to a more sustainable development. Hence, there is an urgent need to learn more about how to govern technical change.”

The e-books are updated annually in order to correspond to a society in change, evolving technologies and new knowledge. “Consequently, we decided to make a product that is also a process and that can develop over time. The result is a series of dynamic e-books – ‘evolving e-books’. I have had the privilege of leading the project”, Björn Sandén says as the third e-book is released at the same time as the first and second comes in their second and third editions.

“At this point we can conclude that, while there are still plenty of hurdles to pass and pitfalls to avoid, the future is not without hope.”

Made in academia

The e-book project is truly an undertaking. 70 researchers mainly form Chalmers, but also from other Swedish
Norwegian, Dutch and Austrian universities and research institutes have made contributions to the three e-books so far. Despite the complexity of the subjects, the e-books are written in a popular science style, in order to reach readers beyond academia. “They are available free of charge and in several formats from the Chalmers website”, Björn Sandén says and it is obvious that he is proud. On the question about what has been the greatest challenge in the project, Björn Sandén quickly responds: “Time. For me it’s time. It is also a challenge to edit so many different contributions into one coherent book, keeping good quality all the way through. At the start I was worried about not getting researchers interested in taking part in the process, but that has not been a problem at all; people have been very engaged”. The greatest benefit for him as a researcher is the overview the process has given him, something he believes he shares with many of the other participating researches since they have arranged seminars around the different chapters. When I ask about the impact outside academia, Björn Sandén thinks for a short while, and then he says “Sometimes I hear that someone at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency or the Swedish Energy Agency, for example, have read something in the e-books and then contacted the writer… but the ripples are hard to follow. I frankly don’t know. For me the most important is to create something that can live on and over time have an impact. Though, we could surely be better at dissemination and perhaps the next phase is to add interactive parts”, he says.

In order to make an impact outside academia the most important responsibility for a university, besides research and education, is perhaps to make the latest knowledge understandable and available. How this then further finds its way to influencing policy, new products or new processes is primarily a task carried out by other actors. And, as Björn Sandén summaries: “If someone would like to know more about these issues, we have certainly put a lot of effort in making the latest knowledge available.”

Text: Niklas Fernqvist