Benefit of research emphasised with clear researcher roles
18 October 2013, by Ragnhild Larsson

Politicians and financial backers often expect research to result in new patents, companies and more jobs in a direct and traceable manner. "Researchers, however, can be useful in many different ways that are not directly linked to commercial value for a specific actor," says Chalmers researcher Eugenia Perez Vico, who wants to broaden the view upon what constitutes useful research.

In her thesis, Eugenia Perez Vico identifies seven different roles in which the researcher can be useful: researcher, teacher, advisor, debater, networker, infrastructure developer and entrepreneur. These roles complement and enable one another.

"If everyone heads in the same direction working to utilities in the same way, the real benefit may well be lost, says Eugenia Perez Vico, who is a researcher in environmental system analysis.

Visible benefit can take time

In order to ascertain what researchers actually do, Eugenia Perez Vico interviewed around 30 people at various companies and within politics who find the research useful.

It can take anywhere from five years to several decades to develop a knowledge base and create a context in which usefulness can arise. A researcher can also have a great deal of knowledge in a field that does not have visible benefit for ten years until someone orders an investigation or an industry takes notice of the expertise. Utilization may also consist of different people getting educated in the process. When they change jobs, they take their knowledge with them into a new context where they can use it to do something positive.

"The research also becomes useful in an indirect manner when a researcher develops a knowledge base that others can pick up and continue to develop, thus generating benefit of their own. Students and collaborative partners also share the benefit of the research with others."

Long-term relationships generate confidence

Taking part in various political processes is another way for researchers to share their knowledge. It might be a matter of contributing to standardisation, the research agenda in the industry or the investigations performed by government agencies. Even if the researcher is not formally a part of an investigation, he or she might be able to answer questions that various actors have. A former PhD student ends up at a department and shares knowledge.

"Sometimes the relationships span several decades and can be very difficult to set a value for, but they can be very important in terms of generating confidence between the world of research and society."

Future needs demand broad knowledge

What is considered to be useful research varies
between different time periods, what the surroundings are like and whose perspective is used.

"If you only include things where direct benefit in the short-term perspective is apparent, you risk watering down research and ruining the conditions needed for future utilization. One of the most important tasks of research is to cover future needs that we don't know much about yet."

Eugenia Perez Vico hopes that researchers will be able to focus more on utilization in this broader manner in the future. For this to be possible, financial backers and universities need to recognise and support the different ways that researchers utilize, primarily in terms of indirect and long-term benefit, she says.

"I have encountered researchers who experience unnecessary stress because they feel like utilization is something extra they are expected to do in addition to everything else. However, it is more a matter of being aware of the contexts in which they can be useful, understanding the value of what they are doing and reflecting on how and if they can improve the processes," says Eugenia Perez Vico.

The thesis is titled "The Impact of Academia on the Dynamics of Innovation Systems, Capturing and explaining utilities from academic R&D."

More information: http://publications.lib.chalmers ... xt/183229/183229.pdf

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