

WESTDEAL – SMART SPECIALISATION STRATEGY FOR WEST FLANDERS

The industrial sector remains in West Flanders a carrying sector of the economy. At the same time, the sector is characterised by a high SME-character, the absence of lead plants s.s. and the absence of fully-fledged university research facilities. Therefore, the concept of the Factories for the Future are part of the economic strategic plan of the Province of West-Flanders, West Deal.

With this plan, West Flanders aims at the sustainable transformation of its strong SME-driven industrial network towards a future-oriented, knowledge driven economy. The plan focusses on the Factories of the Future and TUA West, the technical university alliance that ensures knowledge development and industry oriented research and its valorisation.

Next to these main areas, WestDeal tackles domains that are supportive for the growth of the clusters, i.c. transport & logistics and a start-up policy.

In order to give businesses in West-Flanders – mostly SMEs – every possibility to grow regionally and internationally, the Province of West-Flanders established cluster platforms. The policy of cluster support means smart specialisation for the economic future of West Flanders. The focus lies on four clusters - determined by means of a study by Econopolis - in which West-Flanders excels on international scale and with excellent growth potential :

- **Agro-Food**
The agro-food companies in West Flanders are leading food producers and exporters, world-renowned for the production and processing of meat, fish, vegetables, potatoes and grain products. For example, the largest concentration of frozen food companies in Europe is located in West Flanders.
- **New Materials**
Plastic and textile companies form the new material cluster. By focusing their efforts on combining new materials and technologies they create innovative products, like bio-based polymers and smart textiles. Focus area for this old and new cluster at the same time, is the principle of recycling and circular economy.
- **Blue Energy**
The focal point of the Belgian blue energy cluster lies in West Flanders, Flanders' and Belgium's coastal province.
Companies are harvesting successfully energy produced by the wind, waves and tides on and in the North Sea. Thanks to this West Flemish cluster, Belgium currently ranks 4th in the production of offshore wind energy in Europe. Aim of the cluster is to realise a platform for the development of new blue energy technologies, next to a transformation of traditional SMEs towards servicing companies for the expanding sector, e.g. for building and the O&M (operations & maintenance) of off shore wind parks.
- **Mechatronics & Mechanical Engineering**
Optimising the industrial production. The West Flemish mechatronic companies, several of them world leaders in their domain, ensure that these clusters all have access to the most advanced industrial machinery, equipped with adapted mechanics, electronics or IT systems. In this sense, this cluster is next to a cluster on its own, a supportive cluster for the former three, introducing the Industry 4.0 principles in the West Flemish SMEs.

The cluster platforms aim to create an optimal breeding ground for a future-oriented economy. They consist of a combination of knowledge, experience and know-how from different domains working in

close collaboration with education, science, industry and local government (triple helix). Each cluster is working around five items :

- R&D - Realization of open testing facilities
- Networking and Services to SMEs
- Social modernisation / Human capital. The success of innovation is also dependent on the knowledge and skills of employees. The Academy for The Future links the need of businesses to future-oriented training courses for job seekers, employees and entrepreneurs. This includes both secondary and adult education.
- Branding, a.o. in function of the former item, creating an attractiveness of the sectors in order to attract employees as well as to convince youngsters to follow the needed training & education, next to create an attractive ground for potential new (a.o. foreign) investments.
- Accompanying (logistical) measures. An efficient transport network of roads, railways and canals offers seamless access to and from important consumer markets and production centres. Two deep-sea ports and two international airports, coupled with a dynamic logistics sector that has the experience, knowledge and know-how make West Flanders the ideal location for (European) distribution. Main goal is however to create a dense network of hinterland terminals that enables the production industry of an efficient incoming and outgoing logistic flow.