

## **Lifelong Learning in the SME context:** a vision from the Valencian and Spanish perspective

We will begin with a brief introduction of the Community of Valencia and the characteristics of its productive structure.

The Community of Valencia is situated in the East of Spain and occupies the central corridor of the Mediterranean. It represents 5% of the territory, 10% of the GDP and 10% of the population of Spain. The Community is divided into three provinces: Castellón, Valencia and Alicante.

The productive structure of the Valencian economy has undergone a notable transformation in the last 30 years and has produced an intense terciarisation, with great expansion in the areas of tourism and related activities (hotel and restaurant trade), transport, business and services offered to businesses. In addition, it has maintained its important vocation for exports, based in the more traditional industrial (furniture, shoes, textile, toys, ceramics and car manufacturing) and agricultural (citric fruits, vegetables and wine) sectors.

In the Community more than 99% of enterprises employ less than 50 workers and 88% less than 5 workers. Moreover, a singular characteristic of these enterprises is their geographical location and concentration which makes up industrial districts or "clusters".

They are, currently, going through a worrying crisis, which is certified as being structural by the press and is only a consequence of the increasing growth in the global marketplace. The small dimension of the enterprises and the lack of an industrial policy directed towards the progress of the knowledge society are causes which explain this situation.

It can be stated that the Valencian economy shares the trends and needs predominating on an international scale: in other words, it considers the qualification of human capital, lifelong learning, the demand for better levels of qualification and broader competencies as important.

Below is a brief summary of the current situation of training in the ambit of SMEs.

The educational level of the active population and those of working age, despite the immense progress made, is below the national average and the most qualified communities. The most qualified active population can be found in the service (especially university graduates) and industrial sector.

The commitment by SMEs to the training of its employees is considered as key in the Community of Valencia. Nevertheless, several clear difficulties have arisen due to:

- A lack of global vision and strategic thought by SMEs.
- Little awareness that training is the key to competitiveness and in addition, the shortage of facilities to foster a business culture based in learning. This is attributable to both the enterprise and the worker.
- Degradation of training and learning due to the excessive generalisation on offer which isn't tailored to the specific needs of SMEs.
- A reticence to assume the costs associated with training.
- The development of training systems and actions which are not adapted to SMEs or closely related workplace situations.
- A lack of connection between enterprises and training centres

In this context characterised by a lack of strategic thought and long-term vision, the low levels of participation in ongoing training by SMEs and the need to adapt to the new economy based in knowledge and innovation, contributed to, in 2001, the most recent reform to professional training in Spain.

Finally, we will comment on the Valencian Professional Training Plan within the context of the reforms of Professional Training in Spain and from the perspective of SMEs.

In the Community of Valencia a strategic analysis was undertaken which resulted in the Valencian Plan for Professional Training (approved by the Valencian Professional Training Committee in September 2002), which would be interesting to get to know.