

HEC Liège Workshop on Sustainability together with the RBFA and Standard de Liège

Liège, May 25th 2020 - a workshop spanning several days, students of the Master en Sales Management en Alternance (MSMA) have developed Sustainability ideas for the Royal Belgian Football Association (RBFA) and Standard de Liège. Professor **Willem Standaert** explains the goal of the workshop: *“In the Business Strategy course, we focus on several topical subjects, such as the strategic response to the Corona Crisis, Digital Transformation, and Sustainability. At HEC Liège, we do not just focus on conveying theories and concepts, we want students to learn through applying knowledge in real-life, real-time assignments. Looking for an inspirational context, I quickly thought of sports as it is an impactful vehicle to conduct and communicate sustainability initiatives. Both the RBFA and Standard de Liège are spearheading the Sustainability movement in their respective communities.”*

Why participate in this project? The point of view of the RBFA and Standard de Liège

Hedeli Sassi, CSR Coordinator at RBFA, comments on their motivation to participate: *“Since 2016, Sustainability has been integrated in our strategy and structure. We are currently revamping our Sustainability Strategy, aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and considering our role and impact at several levels: our own organization and teams, our national competition, and the Belgian community at large. It’s the perfect time to obtain an outside, fresh perspective on our strategy. Also, we recently created the RBFA Knowledge Centre, we strongly believe in the future generation that will help Belgian football grow. We therefore want to engage with them in order to build on their knowledge and capabilities to create knowledge for the Belgian football community. Beyond guest lectures, we are looking forward to provide support for football-related research projects with Belgian Universities.”*

Quentin Gilbert, Strategy Lead at Standard de Liège, shares the club’s perspective: *“For starters, we have strong relationships with HEC Liège across the board. In fact, we were planning to host a Sustainability Hackathon including students from HEC Liège in March, but it was postponed due to Covid-19. For us, the real impetus for Sustainability came with the plans for our new stadium. We have the ambition to embed sustainability ideas from the start. However, we are so engrained in our day-to-day operations and organizations of matches, this workshop gave us an opportunity to take a step back. The combined brain force of these future managers can at the same time bolster our conceptual thinking and bring creative, out-of-the-box ideas.”*

On the first day, the CSR managers of both football organizations briefed the students about their sustainability strategy and ongoing efforts and they provided tons of background information (e.g., stakeholder survey results). Groups of students were asked to either come up with new ideas or build on existing initiatives and align clearly with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the organization’s strategy. The next two days, students had the opportunity to develop their ideas and ask for feedback from the Professor as well as the CSR managers. On the final day, each group could pitch its idea in 3 minutes. While this workshop was initially planned in a physical classroom setting, the transition to the online environment happened without issues, according to Professor Standaert: *“The online environment offers the added value of recordings of the sessions being available. Moreover, the*



somewhat more anonymous setting empowered the students to ask some more challenging questions to the managers during the briefing."

How did the students experience the workshop?

Arnaud Iannuzzi, MSMA student who worked on an idea for the RBFA: *"We underestimated the importance of CSR for an organization, both on an ethical and corporate level. We appreciated the practical aspect of this exercise because it allowed us to deepen the concepts of CSR and SDGs. In addition, as amateur footballers and fans ourselves, we don't have the opportunity every day to present a project to the Royal Belgian FA! "*

Sophie Spirlet, MSMA student who worked on an idea for Standard de Liège : *"We came up with the concept of a 'Fast Good' project. The idea is to provide local, good quality and seasonal food in line with the concept of 'Fast Food' that the supporters love. When we developed this project, we wanted to think it through from A to Z: find the concept, the means of financing and the right way to communicate to the general public. The CSR Lead of Standard de Liège shared some data with us so that we could draw up a business plan and get a rough idea of the investment. To make sure that our ideas were feasible, we interviewed different stakeholders."*

Looking back and forward

Hedeli Sassi, CSR Coordinator at RBFA, commented afterwards: *"During the briefing, I explained the SDG's framework that we used to create our own strategy. I was happy to see that the students picked that up to create their own project. It seems we have at least 80 new ambassadors, as they presented their ideas with a lot of pride and confidence. I liked the mix of quick wins (e.g., solar-powered robotic lawn mower, recycled jerseys) as well as long-term projects, such as shifting to climate neutral transport of our fans to the stadium. It was also great to see how the students suggested to involve both our current partners (e.g., Adidas) and new partners (e.g., WWF). Finally, they are clearly on top of digital technology, a case in point was the idea of putting QR codes on re-usable cups combined with gamification in a mobile app for our fans."*

Charles Caillot, CSR Lead at Standard de Liège, added: *"The students presented some wild ideas, such as a movable stadium, seats made of sugarcane, and capturing the energy generated by movements of the players and the crowd during the match. Yet other ideas were much more down to earth and tapped into the sustainability ecosystem of Liège, for instance alternative currency Val'heureux, beer (Curtius), and cutlery (ecopoon), or involved services of some of the companies where the students do their internship. The CSR domain provides an excellent lab to innovate and experiment, and the students understood it perfectly."* Mr. Quentin Gilbert, Strategy Lead at Standard de Liège, concluded: *"We were surprised to see how quickly the students understood the specificities of our industry, the groups pitched initiatives in line with our strategy and complex context. Some of the ideas were very well developed, ready to be adopted in our plans. We need to do some further feasibility analysis, but we may get back in touch with the students for the operational implementation."*

