

Judging the Student of the Year category

By  Juanita Pienaar

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The AdFocus Awards, taking place tonight (Wednesday, 22 November) will honour agencies and individuals, not just for their creative and marketing skills, but for their all-round business acumen. One of the special awards will go to the Student of the Year, sponsored by Coronation Fund Managers.

This year's nominees include Jason Walden, a visual communications student at Vega School of Brand Leadership Johannesburg, Keagan Clack, an art direction student at the Stellenbosch Academy and Raquel Ribeiro, a communication design student at the University of Johannesburg.

I caught up with a few of the judges, Jessica Everson (senior copywriter at FCB), Veli Ngubane (founding partner and chief creative officer at Avatar), Nic Kostouros (creative director and exco member at Promise), Claudi Potter (creative director at Joe Public) and current chairperson, Craig Page-Lee who all commented on the overall quality of the work this year and what they were specifically looking for from this year's entries.

Eight judges from a broad range of agencies sat on the Student Award jury this year. Page-Lee says he was impressed by the calibre of the judges that accepted the invite to participate in the judging and was also impressed at the level of scrutiny, conversation and critique applied to each of the entries.



Current chairperson of the FMAFocus Awards, Craig Page-Lee.



#FMAFocus2017: Top student nominee: Raquel Ribeiro

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#FMAFocus2017: Top student nominee: Keagan Clack

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#FMAFocus2017: Top student nominee: Jason Walden

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There were over 20 entries received this year, however, in line with this year's theme of transformation in the industry, he says he was quite taken back at the low number of entries that supported the theme. He says it could be any of the following reasons: Lack of adequate bursaries or funding, the industry losing its sparkle as a 'must-be-in-it' career option, the larger international agency group's (which employ the majority of staff in the industry) just paying lip-service to the pillars of BBBEE in their report card, the design schools not being compelling enough to attract talent or a combination of all the above.

That said, this was an important part of the conversation, and all participants agreed that something has to change at this

entry point for the industry to become more inclusive.

■ ***What were you looking for from the student finalists while judging the submissions received for this year's awards?***

Page-Lee: While the entries covered a broad range of specialisations, from multi-media design to visual communications and copywriting to design and art direction; we were looking for not only stand-out across any of the areas of focus, but specifically how the idea translated across multiple medium and consumer touch-points. We were also very interested to see how the students interpreted the ideas to be more relevant in the digital world. There were a group of finalists that clearly understood how to articulate their ideas and how to package their submissions and this definitely gave them the edge.

Everson: As a judge, the first thing you always look for is the idea you wished you had done – something new, exciting, simple and perfectly crafted. I know that's a really hard ask so there were some other, more attainable criteria as well. Namely, I wanted to see students who had the ability to go beyond doing 'once off' executions by showing 'campaignable' thinking that brought the big idea to life across multiple mediums. And if one of these mediums was on a digital platform, then that was an added bonus! Being able to think on a digital level is a must in modern advertising, so I was very keen to see ideas that embraced this reality.

Ngubane: Judging students is a different art to judging agency work. In its nature, the work is more conceptual, unpolluted by the realities of budget and strategic direction of the brands. What I was looking for, was the quality of the idea and how that core idea was executed, I was also interested in the students' ability to develop a core market insight into a great creative.

Kostouros: Brave work with purpose. It's important at this level for students to be confident enough to showcase their beliefs and ideals and have the conviction to communicate these ideas in a smart, well-thought thorough way. Great craft should really just be a by-product of this.

Potter: Strong conceptual thinking. In the age of Instagram, InDesign and Pinterest, there really isn't any excuse for bad design or poor photography. Inspiration is everywhere and the right tools are easy to come by. A strong, original concept immediately sets a creative apart from others. Once the concept is there, you hope for great execution, attention to detail and stunning craft. The work also needed to be brave – as a student you don't have any clients to answer to, so there is no excuse for making safe, predictable pieces of work. However, brave and ballsy should not be confused with brash or offensive. Note to students: The f-word doesn't give you instant street-cred or an edge, it just makes you look angry.

■ ***Comment on the overall quality of this year's entries.***

Page-Lee: The overall quality of work submitted was not necessarily to the level that we expected, with a number of submissions just not being packaged well enough, and where there were team submissions, the respective individual's specific contribution to the submission was not well articulated. A key concern for me was that the standard of submission varied considerably across the same design schools from different regions. There seems to be a lack of ruthless consistency of courses and specialisations offered across the respective schools, and this is impacting on the delivery of ideas in meeting the concept of integrated communications. That said, there were clear stand-out submissions.

Everson: Thankfully, all of the above-mentioned criteria were met by this year's students. While some portfolios were obviously stronger than others, a majority of them did include digitally-led ideas and the thinking was fleshed out across multiple executions. It was really great to see, as I've been worried that schools aren't pushing the importance of this kind of thinking strongly enough, resulting in interns and juniors who weren't as well prepared for agencies as they could be. I'm also extremely happy to note that there were even some "I wish I had done that" ideas in the portfolios. It's a great (albeit unusual) feeling to be envious of a student's work – it makes the future of our industry a really exciting one, and I can't wait to see where these bright young minds take us in the years to come.

Ngubane: The concern is the lowering standard and general skill in copywriting, the impact of this decline affected the

quality of the creative submitted. Our industry, especially the creative departments, lack transformation. It was concerning that there were few black students entering – if we are to catalyse transformation, we need more black graduates entering the job market.

Kostouros: The overall quality submitted was good, with a few great standouts. A mix of nice craft and some ideas skewed toward doing good, which was great to see. It's evident that the tertiary institutions are encouraging the use of technology which is important, however, we did feel that the more traditional pieces that tend to showcase distilled, conceptual ability - such as print- should not be forgotten at student level.

Potter: I really wished that there were more writers and that the quality of submissions from the copywriters would be better. I think the advertising schools really need to make an effort to improve the calibre of their writers and pay more attention to the craft. There were some incredible designers, and I thought that several of the students had portfolios that many industry professionals would be envious of. Great quality overall.

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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