

Meet the Annual AdFocus 2015's top student nominees

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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Will Sarah Mitchell of Vega Durban, Kirsten Bennett of Red & Yellow School or Megan Brits of Stellenbosch Design Academy walk off with the title '2015 *Financial Mail* AdFocus Student of the Year'? All will be revealed in just a few hours at the gala evening. Here's why all three are worthy nominees.

Finalists for the 2015 Annual AdFocus Awards were announced on Friday, 9 October. I caught up with this year's three student nominees, as well as their lecturers and a number of the specialist student category jurors to find out what they're expecting from the gala evening...



Sarah Mitchell of Vega Durban, Kirsten Bennett of Red & Yellow School and Megan Brits of Stellenbosch Design Academy

Sarah Mitchell, Vega Durban

Third-year student Mitchell earned her Creative Brand Communications Degree at Vega this year and is currently doing her internship at a Durban ad agency. She says being chosen as a finalist was pretty surprising as she didn't even know that her lecturer had entered her work into the competition.

"It's a wonderful feeling to be recognised at all. I've worked hard and grown immensely in the last few years. To see the late nights pay-off is quite fulfilling. It's also a great motivator. My work is probably not for everybody and my style varies. I'm still trying to find my footing as a designer. So to be recognised at such an early stage of my career is quite lovely. I think it will serve to remind me to keep pushing myself. The wonderful comments from some pretty talented people has given me a boost of confidence that I've unknowingly needed."

Of the locational divide, Mitchell says "I'm proud to be representing Durban. So many Durbanites join the mass exodus to Joburg/Cape Town and drain us of our creativity. Durban seems to be coming alive again and I'm very happy to help cultivate that sense of creativity."

Wise words indeed, with the sentiment enhanced by her visual communications subject navigator Graham Downing, who says she's been a quiet, bright star at Vega, studiously attending to her visual communication craft and coming up with some beautiful work. Downing describes Sarah as: "Very talented, with an excellent aesthetic eye, trending design sensibility and a delightfully quirky approach to the way she creatively solves brand problems."

Kirsten Bennett, Red & Yellow School

Bennett is a third-year art direction and graphic design student who loves watching a small idea between two people grow to become an impactful visual feast. Of her nomination, Bennett says: "It's an awesome feeling to be recognised for something that I find so much joy in doing. To be acknowledged by the renowned judges and creative directors of the AdFocus Awards is a privilege and I am grateful for the opportunity to be exposed to the industry I am about to join. The last three years of my studies have been challenging at times - but this makes it all worth it."

Carmen Schaefer, design and art direction lecturer at Red & Yellow says from the school's side they are elated as this is the second year in a row that they have a finalist, with [Tarryn Chudleigh awarded student of the year](#) last year.

"We are very proud of Kirsten as she has been a very hard working and dedicated student from the first day of her first year," adds Schaefer - clearly that hard work has paid off.

Megan Brits, Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography

Like Mitchell, Brits found her nomination to be an unexpected surprise - while compiling her end-of-year portfolio she was asked to create a shortened version for the AdFocus submission. She took it in her stride, compiling each page with great ease and paying attention to detail.

Cashandra Willemse, HOD: graphic design at the Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography confirms that for the lecturers personally, there is a sense of final resolve when students achieve on national and international platforms exhibiting proof of their guidance and investment. Barbara Fassler, Director of the Academy adds that the nomination showcases the investment the lecturers make in their students as well as the ownership that students take to become great.

Student award sponsor and judges' comments

As sponsor of the student award, Nedbank's Thulani Sibeko: Managing executive, group marketing, communications and corporate affairs, agrees that the student award creates a platform for excellent students to be identified and celebrated, and then gain financial support to further their studies. "As a bank that is committed to education and assisting people to achieve their goals, this was a perfect opportunity to contribute," he explains.

On judging the student category, Ross Makepeace, associate creative director at Y&R Johannesburg was looking for someone who was conceptually good and could pull that through into a slick execution that was easy to understand. "These top three definitely didn't disappoint. The work and quality of ideas was top notch and I'm sure we will see some of the finalists walking on stage to collect some big awards in the near future."

Kyra Antrobus, art director at FCB adds that while it was a mixed bag of student entries overall, she was delighted to see a few standout portfolios, "which were so good we couldn't quite believe they were still students." She was looking for the potential for interesting thinking, new ideas and good craft.

Adam Weber, ECD at Joe Public, says awards like these can have a huge impact on young careers and is certain it will lead to a very well-deserved winner. He took Antrobus' stand on noting some student portfolios that could hold their own amongst employed creatives, but says the winners clearly stood out for "Insightful work that was artfully executed and well packaged." More than just 'talent', he looked at the portfolios as if considering hiring each student, so asked the following questions:

- Is the work smart, with a fresh and exciting take on a brief?
- Is there a sense of pride in the craft and attention to detail?
- Most importantly: Does it look as if they really want to be a part of this amazing industry?

To echo Sibeko and Weber, the Annual AdFocus awards are more than just an accolade - they offer real opportunities from the experience of the event to exposure to industry professionals and substantial prize money to kick start a career. The awards ceremony takes place this evening, 25 November at RoomFive in Rivonia. [Click here](#) for more on this year's nominees.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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