

EXCLUSIVE: Blackboard signs Nikon as sponsor

 By Jessica Tennant

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Blackboard Community recently partnered with Nikon on its mission to democratising photography. I spoke with founder and creative director Nkanyezi Masango, also ECD at The King James Group and Creative Circle Exco member, to find out more.



Masango founded the NPO back in 2017 to expose township high school students to creative careers, especially in advertising and film production, but the objective is to democratise creativity, in every discipline and ultimately contributing to a more impactful, racially diverse creative industry.

The industry is tough to access for most young South Africans without connections and the money to pay for exorbitant fees at private institutions, explained Masango. And the photography industry in particular is very exclusive. So, Nikon's sponsorship will assist Blackboard in breaking these barriers to entry, promoting photography as a viable career to students who would otherwise never consider it or even know it exists.

He explained that how it will work is that they will identify the talented, passionate ones and equip them with the tools they need to succeed, including workshops with leading photographers and Nikon gear to create content.

"We're excited to come together and break barriers. South Africa is rich in talent, all that's needed is to open the doors for everyone."



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Here, an exclusive interview with Masango on how they're doing just that, how they attracted a global brand, and coincidentally it turns out that both of Blackboard's award-winning print ads were developed during a photography workshop and shot on Nikon...

▣ ***What motivated you to start Blackboard back in 2017?***

As a creative director in SA, I've always wanted to work with creatives who represent the broad spectrum of this country's population. After years of trying to find young black talent in Cape Town colleges, I realised that the barrier is actually at a high school level. Most township students are not pursuing creativity as a career because they don't know about it and the various disciplines available. So, I came up with the idea to raise awareness of our industry at township schools and refined it with Tseliso Rangaka and the late SJ Myeza-Mhlambi.

▣ ***Tell us more about your current role and involvement in Blackboard.***

My title is founder and creative director, but I have multiple roles at Blackboard. The main one is to maintain and build relationships with the students, schools and parents. They're the heart of the organisation. I always make sure that the students are at the forefront of everything we do.

▣ ***How did you go about attracting a brand as big as Nikon?***

It didn't happen overnight. More than a year ago, I reached out to Christine Tonking, who runs the marketing for Nikon. We eventually met for a chat and discovered we share the same passion for uplifting young talent. She then had to sell us to her colleagues at Nikon locally and abroad. Ultimately, it's Christine's belief in us and our purpose that got us this sponsorship.

▣ ***When did Nikon come on board, and when does the sponsorship take effect?***

Nikon got on board in September, so it's kicked in right now.

▣ ***What does the partnership entail? / What is Nikon offering? / How will Nikon's sponsorship assist in democratising photography, so to speak?***

We've been doing photography workshops for two years, but the only way students can really hone their craft of photography is to take photos. With Nikon onboard, the students will have Nikon gear to practice and refine their skills using excellent equipment. On top of that, they will learn from some of the best people in photography. That kind of access to gear and mentorship can easily cost R100,000 at a photography school. We're breaking that barrier.

▣ ***What's in it for both parties, and of course the students?***

The students are the real winners in this deal and the industry at large.

▣ ***How many students has Blackboard introduced to the world of creativity, and photography specifically, to date?***

We have exposed over 70 students to the world of creativity so far – and about 30 specifically on photography. But from day one, we have intentionally kept our groups small. Blackboard is not open to everyone. We only select the most talented, passionate students. We believe it's important to demonstrate that excellence is not given, it's earned.

▣ ***Blackboard has won numerous awards, particularly for its creative assets. Please elaborate.***

As a mini agency made up of teenagers, Blackboard creates ads with the students so that they learn in real-time. So far, we have made two print ads featuring our students, which highlight the lack of transformation in advertising. Our very first ad won Adfocus Financial Mail Ad of the Year and the second ad received a finalist at One Show and the Loeries. Both of these were developed during a photography workshop and coincidentally were shot on Nikon.

■ ***Comment on the growth or success of Blackboard over the past four years.***

It's been unreal. We started with a handful of students in Gugulethu. Today we have 74 active students from Soweto, Diepsloot, Gugulethu and Nyanga. It's taken a lot of personal sacrifices to get to this point, but we couldn't have done it without the support of the industry.

For instance, Creative Circle funded our expansion into Johannesburg. On top of that, individuals like Neo Mashigo, Pete Khoury, Frances Marais, Saf, Paul Ward and so many others, have donated their time to host workshops. The success of Blackboard is determined by the support of industry leaders like that.

■ ***What change do you hope to see in the creative industry, and what impact do you hope to achieve through the organisation?***

I would love to see the industry reach a point where 'transformation and diversity' are no longer part of the conversation.

“ Diversity should come standard. It must be baked in so much that we can focus on other things – like our craft, innovation and building brands. ”

I hope Blackboard can play a role in getting us there.

■ ***Any exciting plans in the pipeline?***

Yes, we're looking into expanding our offering in film production. Watch this space.

For more information, go to [BlackboardCommunity.co.za](https://www.blackboardcommunity.co.za).

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