

LABOUR

Students feel the heat of a tough summer job market

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Erica Buglisi is worried.

The 17-year-old has one more year of high school in Toronto and is hoping to start saving money to finance the English or biology degree she plans to pursue at university.

But after applying to nearly all of the stores in a Toronto mall with no luck, she feels like time is running out.

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“It’s really nerve-racking,” she said. “I’m realizing how close university is and how expensive it is.”

Ms. Buglisi's story is typical of job seekers her age. The summer months spent out of school can make or break the future of students who rely on a job to finance their education. But the picture is bleak in the student job market – the unemployment rate was almost 15 per cent in May, more than double Canada's overall unemployment rate of 7.3 per cent. And when Statistics Canada releases data for June on Friday, the numbers are not expected to improve.

Employers who are already anxious over developments in Europe and the United States are even more wary of hiring young or inexperienced workers, a reason student-aged workers feel the pinch more than most during a period of economic slowdown.

And since the 1980s, student life has changed in ways that increase financial pressure on cash-strapped students.

Undergraduate tuition in Canada has risen more than 200 per cent since 1991 and averaged \$5,366 a year in 2011-2012.

About 50 per cent of university and college students now work part-time during the school year to offset their costs, up from one in four in the 1970s.

In 2005, 57 per cent of post-secondary students graduated with student debt, compared to 49 per cent a decade earlier, according to Statistics Canada.

Iris Unger, the executive director of YES, a youth employment centre in Montreal, said he has already seen more students looking for work than all of last summer.

Before helping students land a job, Ms. Unger said this summer she and her staff have to focus on the mental health issues stemming from students' money-related stress, as well as frustration and low self-esteem after multiple rejections from employers.

"People are self-medicating and we're seeing more substance abuse," Ms. Unger said. "That's the fallout of the whole unemployment issue."

An unsuccessful job search over the past two months has cost Kyle Nelson about \$4,000 in lost income, the Ryerson University engineering student estimates.

That money would have covered close to three quarters of his tuition for the upcoming year.

In his past three years of study, Mr. Nelson has been able to avoid student loans, but said he will now probably have to apply for funding from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

In the early summer when hopes are particularly high, students aim for jobs in fields where they want to gain experience, such as clerical work in an industry where they eventually hope to have a career.

Unfortunately, these are exactly the kinds of jobs in the middle of the pay scale that disappear in a recession, said Henry Siu, an associate professor in the economics department at the University of British Columbia.

Mr. Nelson said he's filled out about 50 applications since April without a single job offer. He's now broadened his search from engineering jobs to anything that will earn him some money.

"You want to be able to get the experience, but in the end it's about the money and being able to support yourself."

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