

More students find summer work, but finances tight

Post-secondary picture not bright, says official

By Sarah McGinnis, Calgary Herald August 12, 2010



Without financial help from her family, Maggie Qi says she couldn't afford to cover her educational expenses.

Photograph by: Archive, Calgary Herald

Alberta's post-secondary students working to pay for their studies had better luck finding a summer job this year, but some education lobby groups say the financial situation remains dire faced by many students struggling to afford their education.

According to Statistics Canada, 77.5 per cent of Alberta students between the ages of 20 and 24 who are returning to a university or college program this fall were able to secure summer employment in July.

This represents an increase from last summer where student employment hit a low of 71.9 per cent in Alberta during the same month.

"It's certainly not a rosy picture because we are coming out of a massive recession, but things have improved slightly in some places. Students who weren't working last summer are, in some cases, working this summer," said David Molenhuis, chairman of the Canadian Federation of Students.

By all accounts, the summer of 2009 was a dismal year for Calgary-area students searching for temporary employment thanks to the economic downturn.

"Last year was terrible," said Craig Richardson, who is finishing his geology degree at the University of Calgary but spent last summer drywalling after a failed attempt to secure work in his field.

"It was really difficult to find field jobs, which is what I was interested in. This year has been better. I actually found a job," said Richardson, who is now an assistant to a PhD student helping with research.

Fellow U of C geology student Carey Boucher, 20, found summer employment in the oil and gas industry this year. But he had to start looking back in September.

"It really is a year-long process," Boucher said.

Statistics Canada estimates only 7.5 per cent of returning post-secondary students across the country were still actively searching for work this July based on routine surveys conducted nationally each month, said spokesman Jason Gilmore.

But a national survey compiled by an education public policy group estimates the number of unemployed students in Canada is actually closer to 20 per cent when the number of students who have given up on the job hunt are factored in, said Miriam Kramer, director of the Canadian Education Project.

Kramer's group made the claim based on an online survey of 4,802 university students who plan to continue their education this fall.

The survey, released Wednesday, also found that Canadian students who secured a summer job this year earned an average of \$440 weekly, or roughly \$12.90 an hour.

The findings have led the organization to call on Ottawa to make changes to Canada's student loans program to better accommodate students who weren't able to secure a summer job, or earned too little to make a down payment on their fall tuition.

"There's an assumption on the government's part that all students are contributing to their education and implicit in that is they are working through the summer and can contribute in many cases a fairly substantial portion," said Kramer.

"Some students are choosing not to work or some can't find work . . . Those students who can't work have a gap in their funding for postsecondary education."

"We're calling into question that policy and asking the government to look at that again," Kramer said.

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, which runs the national student loan program, could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

But according to its website, the federal government is expecting to support more than 245,000 students with its educational grants program that was launched during the 2009-2010 school year to replace the previous Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation's millennium bursaries.

Current government education grants include specific programs for students from low-income and middle-income families, as well as some for part-time students or those with disabilities.

Between coaching three short-track speedskating classes a day and taking summer coaching and kinesiology courses, Maggie Qi is already spending up to 12 hours on the U of C campus each day.

Without financial help from her family, she said she couldn't afford to cover her educational expenses. And there simply isn't much time left in her already crowded day to take on another part-time job.

Molenhuis agrees student financial worries aren't necessarily alleviated by having a summer job, given that most students earn little more than minimum wage and must use the bulk of their summer paycheques to fund their immediate living expenses.

"You cannot, at this point in time, work a minimum wage of job for all the possible number of hours and raise enough to pay for the upfront costs of post-secondary education. This is a significant problem students face," Molenhuis said.

But merely increasing the amount of money given to students in government loans isn't going to help, either, given the \$13.5 billion current and former post-secondary students owe the federal government, he said.

Molenhuis would like to see the government provide more and better paying jobs for students, and boost the number of grants offered to low-income students who need help the most.

smcginnis@theherald.canwest.com

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