

‘Failure to launch’: Canadian students aren’t prepared for adulthood



This is the first story in a four-part series about the transition between high school and "the real world" — whether that's college, university, the workforce or something completely different. [Failure To Launch](#) examines the gaps in Canada's education system.

By [Meghan Collie](#) Global News

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When Pearlia Veerasingam was in high school, she had no idea what she wanted to do after graduation.

She was in Grade 11 and remembers being told to talk to the school's counselor for guidance, but it wasn't a quick solution to her problem.

"I remember feeling so discouraged after that conversation," Veerasingam told Global News.

Veerasingam was asked what degree she wanted, which type of institution she wanted to attend and if she had any experiences with apprenticeship. This left the 21-year-old even more overwhelmed.

"She was asking me what degree I saw myself getting, what my grades were, [if I even had the] grades to qualify for the programs I was looking at," she continued.

"For someone who doesn't know what they want, and then being asked all these questions, it makes you feel so pressured."

Not going to university was out of the question — an expectation she attributes, in part, to her Sri Lankan upbringing. But the Toronto-native didn't want to waste her time or her parents' money by making the "wrong" choice either.

"In the South Asian community, taking time off or going to college... you'll get the support eventually, but it will be a choice that's criticized at first," she said.

“One of the biggest things you always hear is ‘you’re going to find your calling,’ but I feel like a lot of students are still trying to find themselves at that age.”

That same year, her law teacher had suggested a politics degree and that’s when things started to make sense: she always had a passion for it.

“It was my teacher who said, ‘you’re great at advocating for policies and procedures... you should really look into something like that,’” she said.

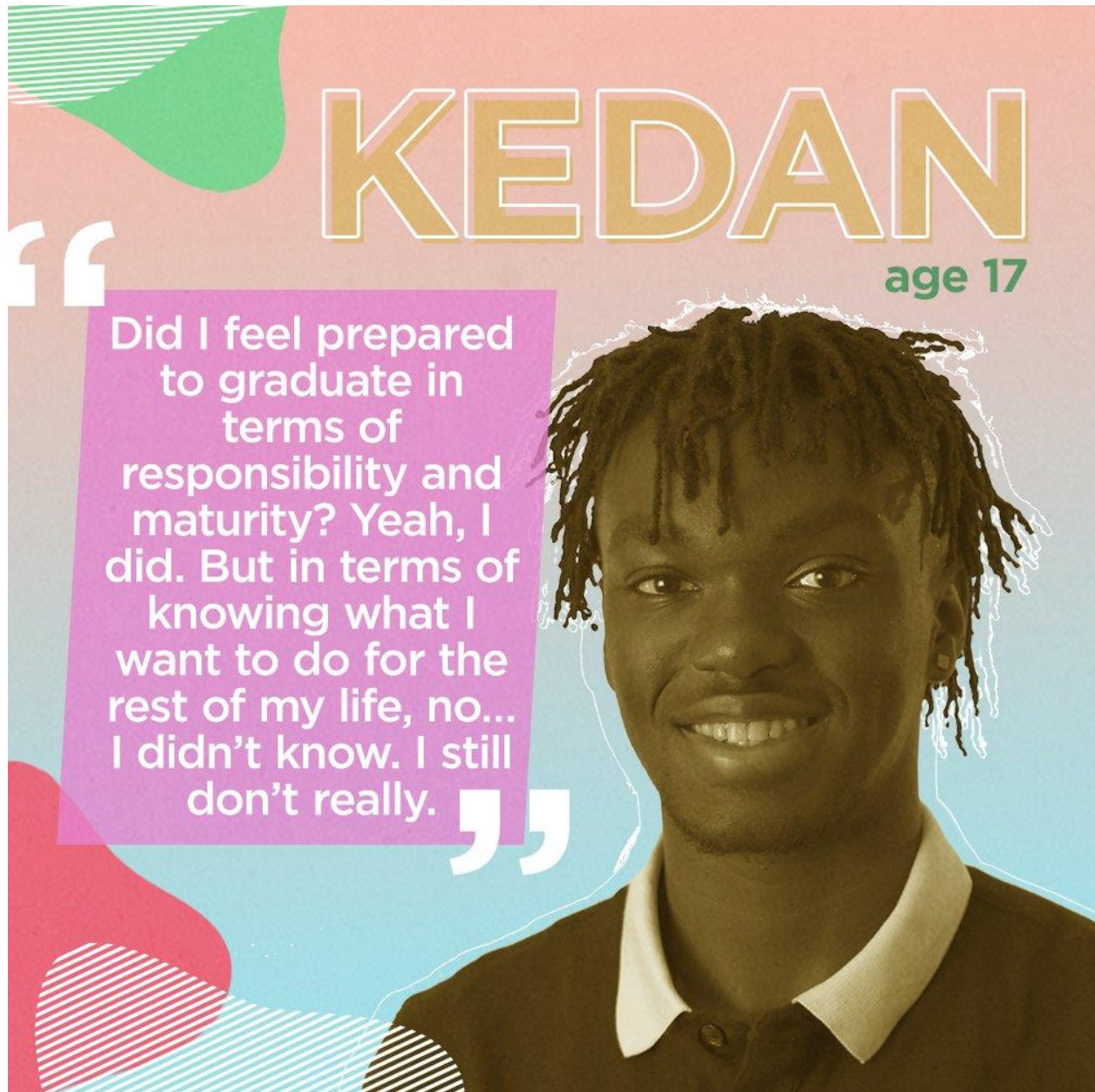


Illustration: Laura Whelan. Illustration: Laura Whelan

Veerasingam, who graduated from Ryerson University earlier this year, is confident she made the right choices in Grade 12.

According [to a recent study](#) by think tank Canada 2020, the average student spends roughly \$29,568 on higher education. The report found 70 per cent of all new Canadian jobs will require post-secondary education or skills training.

Like Veerasingam, thousands of teenagers in Canada will be asked to make the same decisions about their futures in the next few months.

Often, students feel pressure to make the “right” choice — a decision that can lead to anxiety and confusion. With all of this at stake, experts wonder if teens are actually prepared to move forward.

The impact of a big decision on a young brain

One of these experts is [Erin O’Rourke](#), a teacher in the Toronto District School Board and a registered psychotherapist (qualifying) at the [Toronto Counselling Centre for Teens](#). She worries about the pressure the education system puts on young people.

She says many students haven’t figured out what they want to do with their lives: “I guess you could call them the ‘failure to launch’ kids,” she said.

In her experience, asking teenagers to make life-changing decisions about their education and career is problematic for a number of reasons.

“We live in a world where [these kids] have been socialized from a very young age to [believe that they] can be anything,” O’Rourke said.

“How, in a world where you’re told that you can do anything or be anything, could you choose one thing that you want to be?”

O’Rourke is also concerned about the ongoing brain development of a teen that age.

“They are in a stage of redevelopment unlike any other, since they were first conceived. The [part of the brain] that’s involved in long-term decision-making, problem solving, managing time, weighing out consequences — that takes well into the twenties to really develop,” she said.

“So for them to try and make a long-term decision at that point is a hard thing to do, for sure.”



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Although there isn't enough research to suggest the pressure to make tough decisions about education or careers is directly linked to mental health issues, experts like O'Rourke says there could be a relationship between the two.

"Not knowing what you want to do with your life [can make you feel] really anxious, which could lead to depressive symptoms," she said.

The stress of not knowing

Neel Shah, 16, just started his final year of high school in Toronto, and he's already consumed with anxiety about what he'll do when he graduates.

"I don't feel prepared to leave high school at all, in any way, shape or form," he said. "I'm absolutely terrified of the future."

Shah is unsure of what he wants to study, and, subsequently, where he wants to work.

In a dream world, he would pursue a college program in music and entertainment. But like others in his age group, Shah also needs to consider his parents' opinion and the state of the workforce right now.

"I don't really want to go to university ... but I feel like there's a big stigma around choosing college," Shah said. "I mean, I'm fine with it — I'm interested in business and law and a few other programs — but my true passion lies somewhere else."

He's prepared to lean on family and friends for guidance during the next year, but is scared to be on his own as an adult.

"I know how to solve a derivative, but I have no idea how to do tax returns or set up an account at the bank or anything like that," Shah said.

"The whole idea that you have to have your whole life decided at 16, 17 years old, it's terrifying," he said.

Instead, he wonders if students his age should have alternative experiences before post-secondary education.

"We should be trying out new things, trying to taste as much as possible and gaining insight about what the world can offer us and what we can offer the world."

Preparing for change

Although graduation rates in this country are higher than they've ever been, experts say this doesn't necessarily mean students are prepared for what comes next.

[Between 1997 and 2010](#), Canada's high school completion rate increased by roughly 11 per cent — from 77 per cent to 88 per cent.

"This is one of the biggest unsung successes of our school system," said [Kelly Gallagher-Mackay](#). She's a professor in public law, inequality and educational opportunity at Wilfred Laurier University. "It's a huge change, and it's important for preparing people for the future."

The co-author of [Pushing the Limits: How Schools Can Prepare Our Children Today for the Challenges of Tomorrow](#) thinks that's only half the story.

"The starting line has moved. Jobs you used to be able to do with only a high school credential either don't exist now or they ask for many more academic qualifications," she said.

“The vast majority of the jobs that we think could lead to anything like a stable, middle-class life require post-secondary education.”

The onus isn't entirely on high schools to prepare students for their post-secondary education. Gallagher-Mackay believes employers, community organizations and families all play a part. She argues that high schools need to do better.

Part of this is emphasizing the need for teaching social-emotional skills — the ability to work with others, adapt and commit to lifelong learning. “Your job isn't going to stay the same no matter what. We can no longer assume that and we need to prepare students for that,” she said.



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Gallagher-Mackay said good work is happening in some provinces, but there's definitely room for improvement.

"B.C. has grown a lot closer to having a curriculum that explicitly talks about what they mean by 'social-emotional learning.' ... But in Ontario, there's very little assessment around social-emotional skills, and I think there's reason to worry about that," she said.

In July, the Ontario government announced [a new financial literacy curriculum for Grade 10 students](#) in an effort to better address the needs of students. It was widely lauded as a step in the right direction, but Gallagher-Mackay is skeptical.

"Students should understand some basics of consumer finance, but it's not a solution if they have uncertainty ahead," she said.

"If you think teaching people to budget in Grade 10 is going to be a silver bullet, you're overselling what you're teaching."

Transferring skills into the real world

When it comes to helping students determine what career they would like to pursue, Vancouver resident [John Horn](#) is of the opinion that Canadian high schools need to focus more on career-integrated learning.

He's the board chair at [CERIC](#), a national charitable organization that advances education and research in career counselling and career development.

This means having career or experiential learning opportunities woven into the school curriculum. "When you're studying things like biology, math or literature, how are we making sure that educators are always putting those into real world examples?"

He also emphasizes the need for internship and co-op opportunities as a way to expose high school students to the "real world" applications of their studies.

"At the end of the day, it's going to take a combination of [these] things and counsellors, teachers and parents having these conversations in real time, all the time," he said.



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Veerasingam did a co-op term at a law firm during high school, which helped her figure out what she wanted to do as a career — but it hardly prepared her for the difficulties of actually finding full-time work after university.

“After completing my Bachelor’s degree, I believed I had the correct skills and knowledge that could be applied to the workforce ... but that wasn’t enough,” she said.

She said she felt the same confusion leaving university as she did leaving high school, except on another scale. “Leaving high school, I felt [a lack of] confidence in my skills and knowledge to enter the workforce. Now, after university, I felt an extreme amount of pressure and isolation.

“The lack of opportunities and a crazy amount of competition has made me feel defeated.”

Veerasingam is frustrated — she graduated in June and has yet to find a job in her preferred field.

“I don’t think universities fully prepare students with the right tools to get started,” she said. “Most of the curriculum focuses on theoretical knowledge rather than practical knowledge that can be applied to the every-day.”

This is why Horn also advocates for more time spent on teaching students about change and resilience throughout high school.

“I think the number one thing to know and to prepare for is the rate of change in the world,” Horn said. “It’s been constant — the work has always been changing, generation by generation — but it’s never changed this much, this quickly.”

To prepare students for this reality, Horn recommends honing two distinct buckets of skills: human skills and technical aptitude.

The technical aptitude means being able to unlearn a particular skill and learn a new one, once that old skill becomes obsolete.

Human skills are things like “being resilient, being open-minded and having a growth mindset [or] a focus on always learning,” he said. “Even though the world might change a lot, these are things that are always going to make you relevant” to an employer.

The open-minded community approach

Like Gallagher-Mackay, Horn is a proponent of the community approach.

“For starters, we need to support the very overtaxed high school guidance counsellors,” he said.

School boards need to be better at identifying and providing the “resources and tools that counsellors need to be able to have those really simple, straightforward but also enriching career conversations.”



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Beyond that, parents need to help students make meaning of those conversations. Parents need to ask questions like, “What does that mean to you?” and “What interests you?”

“Even the simple act of shifting the conversation from ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ [to] ‘What kind of work interests you right now?’” will help students better prepare, Horn said.

Ultimately, every member of a student’s support system needs to remain open-minded.

“Try and cultivate a bit of empathy by thinking about your [own] experience,” Horn tells parents. “Usually, when [you] reflect on their story, it’s not as linear as [you] might think.”

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