

EconMatters

Faculty Profile

Dr. Mrittika Shamsuddin

I am Mrittika Shamsuddin, currently an instructor in the Economics Department of Dalhousie University. It is an honor to get this opportunity to talk about my journey of becoming what I am today.

Growing up as the daughter of a government bureaucrat in Bangladesh meant moving around a lot as allowed by my father's numerous job postings. So, my childhood was spent as dreamer, moving through different parts of rural Bangladesh, which was, rich in its lush greenery, and in its allure to chase butterflies and to go cycling by the lakes. Yet, chaos was only a step away. As young girl of six, I saw with my own eyes, as zealots burnt down the temple in front our house, and used tear gas on my neighbours, leaving them no choice but to flee to a different country – all in the name of religion.



And these would become my first experience with refugees and immigration. My current research revolves around the challenges that immigrants and refugees face in integrating in a new environment and their impacts on the host community.

Then when I was in middle school, my father got transferred to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, drastically changing life as I knew it. With no playgrounds and butterflies to chase, I was stuck in our small apartment, with the concrete jungle around me. I could not see green through my window anymore; just a rickety old building, with an ugly front gate bearing the words “Government High School” and flying the Bangladeshi flag. To make matters worse, my parents had to get me admitted to a small private school, because I could not pass any of the government school entrance exam in Dhaka. And this was but only the beginning of yet another, completely different world for me. I began to realize that math was the religion at home. My grandfather was a headmaster and math schoolteacher during his time, my uncles were math professors at universities, and my younger cousins could solve math problems while having dinner, which I could not solve even working through diligently on pen and paper.

And yet, as I struggled, alienated from my dream world, and suddenly thrust into reality, I did not stop looking through my window. Through my window, I could not help noticing, that on the first Thursday of every month, the girls in the government high school would line up to collect a “prize money”, which I later realized as I grew older, was their “stipend”. The “prize money” sure made them happy, and in my forlorn world, made me jealous. Why do they get to have the “prize money”? Why do they need it? Who is giving it to them and why only the girls get it? And many years later, I tried to answer some of these questions in one of my PhD dissertations chapters at Georgetown University.

The other “thing” I could not look away from was my grandfather, who took up the mantle to tutor me in Math and English. He taught both through storytelling. He told me stories about what motivated each problem, about Pythagoras and Archimedes’ eureka moment, about Galileo and his power of observation, and he told me about all the different students he has had. And as I slowly improved in Math and English, I could not help but marvel at the strength and influence of a good teacher.

Fast forward a few years, the rural me was competing at an international level to gain admission to a liberal arts college in the United States. And when the time came and I was admitted to Lafayette College, Pennsylvania, I chose Mathematics and Economics as my double major. The four years at Lafayette College were very enlightening.

It was the first time I was living on my own and making my own choices; away from home, from parents, and even further from my rural greenery. I had to work many menial jobs to pay for my living and had to pull many all-nighters to complete my assignments. And finally, my diverse childhood experiences began to be tied with a single thread: Economics, with its focus on human decision making, and Mathematics, with its ability to model society, them coming together to build simple policies to better the lives of millions, and good Professors, with their strength and influence on students. It would also be at Lafayette College, where I would first put to test my abilities as a teacher myself.

Thus, it came as no surprise, when I decided to pursue my Ph.D. to study the effect of social protection programs on labor market of South Asian countries. After my PhD, family obligations became a priority and I joined UAE University (UAEU) at Abu Dhabi as an assistant professor. UAEU had a very tech savvy campus, segregated by gender and I was teaching in both. The students were very different from the students that I had at Lafayette College and Georgetown University, in their backgrounds and aims in lives, but that made the job more interesting. I learned from the students as much as they learned from me and realized learning is not always goal oriented. It is a process that leads to change, and I felt proud of me for the first time when after graduation, one of the female students got a job with the Ministry of Economic Development and reached out to work on a project that investigates the failure of government policies to increase national employment in the private sector and a collaboration started that is still ongoing.

Then in 2018, life played its wild card one more time and my family moved to Canada, and I joined Dalhousie University. We, my husband, and I, had to sacrifice a lot for this move, both financially and professionally but as we got settled, we began to see the silver lining. At Dalhousie University, I met some bright and beautiful minds among my colleagues and students, from whom I have continued to learn. In Halifax, I seem to be living in the laps of mother nature, walking by the shore, and striving to affect the lives of my students and learn from them, along with collaborating with researchers from around the world to raise awareness for more evidence-based policy making.

Alumni Profiles

Riel Tetreault BSc (Hons in Economics) 2020

When I came to Halifax, I actually came for the King's Foundation Year Program. However, I also wanted to continue with math and sciences at Dalhousie. I picked economics because it was considered a science, it related to my interest in politics, and it did not have any labs. I was very bad at labs. I was good at math though, so I took honours calculus. I learned I was only so-so at math. Econ it was. First year econ is, best I can tell, a chore at most schools. I did well, and found it mildly interesting. I was far more taken away by philosophy, in which I did less well. I did enjoy feeling like econ could teach me practical levers through which to interact and influence the world around me. Keeping my options open, I stuck with the more rigorous BSc program in my combined honours of economics and contemporary studies. I grew to love econ, particularly the sort of diagrammatic puzzles one encounters in intermediate macro graphs, or the analysis of games found in Strategic Thinking. To the surprise of a party-politics minded younger me, I fell firmly into the camp of microeconomics. I formed strong relationships with my profs, first with Professor Weina Zhou, then Professor Ruth Forsdyke and many others.



Their advice solidified my decision to stick with economics. I chose to complete my honours in econ, with an eye to grad school. The honours program had great camaraderie, and it was a well-guided walk through researching that made me eager to keep learning and applying the econ skills I was studying. I got accepted into UBC's Vancouver School of Economics, with scholarship and fellowship awards, and found out Dalhousie had prepared me very well. In particular, Strategic Thinking and 4th year Micro at Dal did such a good job of preparing me that I had no new material to cover in my master's level micro course (and I only attended 3 lectures). One year and change after my degree at King's and Dal, I have now completed my Master's at UBC with an A+ average and a major research paper on election codes and community well being. I now work at Big River Analytics, pursuing a wide range of topics in my ideal field of Indigenous economics. I am thankful to the Dalhousie Economics Department for sparking my interest in the subject, and providing me with a strong background in the field.

Tammy Shirle MA, 2000

I graduated from Dalhousie with a Master of Arts (MA) in 2000. During my studies, I found myself torn between my interests in economic development in lower-income countries, and Canadian labour market policies. After graduation, I found an opportunity to work in economic development, as an intern sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency. That internship took me to work in Romania for a microcredit organization, making great use of my training in development economics as we developed strategies to manage risk while supporting business opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

But my love for Canadian policy work brought me back to Canada, and I decided to pursue a PhD in economics at the University of British Columbia.



I spent 5 years in Vancouver, where in addition to hiking many mountains with my partner, I found myself working with some of the best labour economists in the country (whose research projects often involved their friends and coauthors at Dalhousie). I finished my PhD in 2006 and found myself working as a professor with Wilfrid Laurier University's Economics Department. Settling into Kitchener, Ontario came quite naturally to me and my partner, and we decided to stay and have our family here. I've enjoyed teaching at Laurier, and my research has focused on understanding the Canadian labour market and public policy, especially the importance of income support policies and the unique circumstances of women in the economy.

Apart from the usual academic pursuits that come with being a professor, I find myself in roles I never expected to be in. I've met with many politicians from many political parties over the years – MPs, MPPs, Senators, and even the Prime Minister – to talk about policy gaps that need to be addressed and ideas for how best to manage that. I find myself on television explaining public finance issues, or job numbers, trying to help everyone make sense of the statistics. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, I found myself in working groups trying to piece together feasible policy options to support families, and regularly fielding calls from journalists trying to sort through everything happening in 2020. It has kept me very busy, but it's also a lot of fun. (When my daughter sees me on TV, she tells her friends I'm kind of famous, and it's cute.)

When I think back to the day I decided to pursue my MA at Dalhousie, I'm still confident it was the best decision. At the time, it was a little scary. I had grown up in a small northern Manitoba town, so even moving to Winnipeg to do my undergraduate degree at the University of Manitoba seemed a big deal. In hindsight, moving from Winnipeg to Halifax was the best thing for me. I got to live by the ocean for a while, offering a wonderful contrast with the prairies. I made many amazing lifelong friendships while living in Halifax. Perhaps more importantly, I found an economics department where the professors were welcoming and ready to support me in learning new tools and new ideas.

Tomson Ogwang Ph.D.

My journey to Dalhousie started with an informal discussion with my econometrics professor and advisor at the University of Leeds, Professor Garry Phillips, in his office at the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. I had sought his advice about my prospects for pursuing a Ph.D. after completing my MA at the University of Leeds. Professor Phillips highly recommended Dalhousie for the Ph.D. based on his very positive sabbatical experience at Dalhousie several years earlier.

Upon completing my MA at the University of Leeds, I had to return to Uganda, my country of birth. The timing of my return to Uganda was perfect because soon after I got there, there was a call for Canadian Commonwealth Scholarships awards for graduate studies in Canada. Following a competitive selection process, I was awarded the scholarship to pursue a Ph.D. in Economics at Dalhousie, my first choice.



Upon successful completion of the Dalhousie Ph.D. program, I held teaching positions at Saint Mary's University and the University of Northern British Columbia before moving on to Brock University where I rose to the rank of full Professor of Economics.

In the early years of the Dalhousie Ph.D. program, I took classes with a diverse group of students from around the world, including career professionals, refugees, and fresh university graduates, among others. I found this diversity to be enriching both academically and socially as we all learned from each other's experiences.

At Dalhousie, I also had many role models ranging from junior faculty who presented cool papers culled from their Ph.D. theses and senior faculty who were working on very interesting and diverse research projects. One thing I always counted on as a Dalhousie economics Ph.D. student is the highly approachable faculty who went beyond the usual call of duty to provide guidance when needed. The collective effort of faculty in the Department to assist student researchers is one of my most notable experiences at Dalhousie.

I appreciate the opportunity Dalhousie gave me to get teaching experience as a Ph.D. student by circumventing the widespread practice of hiring people with vast Canadian teaching experience. I remember being assigned full responsibility for teaching an intensive three-week summer intermediate microeconomics course for which I had to learn the skills by doing. With the generous assistance of many faculty members in the Department I did it successfully. The experience I gained from this and subsequent teaching opportunities at Dalhousie helped me to secure permanent academic positions.

I attribute my research accomplishments to the skills I acquired from Dalhousie. Although several of the papers I published were with my Ph.D. thesis supervisor, the late Professor Gouranga Rao, I received help from many other faculty members in the Department who enthusiastically provided very helpful comments along the way. Professor Rao also gave me a list of hand-written ideas and incomplete papers related to some interesting problems in economics. I have since completed and published several papers related to some of those ideas and passed a few ideas on to others.

My exposure to reputable international conferences was also facilitated by Professor Rao who often went out of his way to pool funds from various sources to make sure that we physically travelled to present papers at many international conferences. I continue to interact with renowned researchers from different continents whom I met at those conferences.

The assistance I got from the faculty in the Department extended beyond academics.

Finally, I admire the efficiency and patience of the staff members in the Department of Economics. They were instrumental in preparing many reference letters for jobs when I was on the job market.

News

- **In Memoriam: Paul Bickford Huber**

Paul Huber, a retired member of the Economics Department, passed away peacefully in the Halifax Infirmary, QEII, on June 24, 2021, after a brief illness. He was 86.

Paul was a graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy and Yale University. Paul started teaching at Dalhousie in 1965 and taught international trade and international finance. He was part of an expansion of the Department that started in the mid-1960s that led, in part, to the start of a PhD program, which admitted its first students in 1968-69. He was Graduate Coordinator in the Department when the PhD program started and played an instrumental role in its design and formation. He also introduced a thesis seminar for MA students, which he taught for several years, during which time he could often be seen with his faithful Bassett hound Susan, in his office and even his lectures.

Paul was also the driving force behind the introduction of the so-called Comprehensive Integrated Program which allowed majors in economics to take a cohesive package of modules for credit while exposing them to more subject areas of economics than a set of individual courses of equal credit. For a long time, Paul taught a course in European Economic History, a course he was still teaching when he retired and continued to teach it post-retirement.

Paul firmly anchored his ideas and professional work to strongly felt ethical principles. This was clearly demonstrated in his commitment to the students he taught and his research and publications. He took on the job of Project Director for a public service training program the Department started in Nepal in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. When he initially visited Nepal, he was greeted by an earthquake. Over time, he became very attached to Nepal and to the people there.

Paul was an avid music lover, especially of opera. He was a long-time member of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society in Halifax and appeared in many of their productions. He would often burst out in song as he was walking through the halls of the Economics Department and sometimes, even in his classrooms.

His obituary can be found at <https://www.saltwire.com/halifax/obituaries/paul-bickford-huber-57593/>

- Congratulations to this years award recipients!

Principles of Economics Prize: John Pearce, BSc Major in Undeclared Science

Economic Theory Prize: Yixuan Wang, BSc Major in Statistics and Economics

Econometrics Prize: Jiaqi Bu, BSc Major in Economics

Anonymous Prize: Kate Eldred, BSc Major in Economics

International Student Essay Prize: Jiaqi Bu, BSc Major in Economics

Honours Thesis Award Recipient: Harper Metler, BSc Honours in Economics

University Medal in Economics: Yawen Hu, BSc Honours in Economics

Rao Memorial Prize: Mahmood Hasan, MA

Teaching Assistant Award: Francisko Begolli, MA

Dal/SDUFE Join Program Scholarship Recipients