

# EconMatters

## Faculty Profile

### My non-traditional path to Economics - James McNeil

My first professional job was as a cabinetmaker building furniture. I worked in a small shop building mostly custom pieces of furniture for whoever walked through the door. It was a great job, but one that didn't pay much and offered no possibility for advancement. Still, I couldn't imagine a better-suited job in that field, which made me consider attending university with the goal of changing careers completely. That idea became final after an ill-timed decision to quit my job and move cities in the summer of 2009. If you can avoid it, you should not quit your job in the depths of a recession. Being 21 and allergic to any and all sensible advice, however, that's exactly what I did. This wasn't a completely senseless act; my partner was moving to attend graduate school so this allowed us to remain together in the same city. But finding a new job, in a declining industry, proved challenging. For most of the year I worked in a warehouse, making minimum wage sorting parts for locomotives.



The next academic year, I enrolled at Carleton University, initially with the intention of studying history and political science. Without much thought, I registered for an introductory economics course, reasoning that a cursory knowledge of economics might help with my other studies. Almost immediately I was hooked. What initially attracted me to economics was the use of an analytical framework which could be used to study complex and important problems. Many of the concepts even seemed applicable in my own life—the concept of opportunity cost led me to take courses during the summer semesters, so that I completed my undergraduate degree in less than three years.

Still, I wasn't sure that I could succeed in the economics program. Occasionally someone will ask me if there are any transferable skills between cabinetmaking and economics. The answer is No. My knowledge of mathematics at the time might have been generously described as rudimentary. If I were to major in economics, I would basically be starting from scratch. So that's what I did, beginning with a course in pre-calculus which essentially covered all the high school-level math I'd forgotten (but did not count for credit towards my degree), and eventually more advanced university-level courses in calculus and linear algebra. I found that a subject I had struggled with years ago now came much easier given my new sense of purpose. I finished my economics degree near the top my class and was awarded a Senate Medal for outstanding academic achievement at graduation.

After completing my undergraduate degree, I moved to Kingston, Ontario to pursue my graduate studies at Queen's University. My new environment suited me perfectly, so much so that, while many of my friends in the program were looking for jobs, I decided to stay to complete a PhD. I have always been intellectually curious and the shift to a research-based program, while challenging at first, was also quite exciting. Research is a fundamentally creative exercise. Whereas much of my coursework had focused on learning new models or econometric methods, now I was applying them to answer new and interesting questions.

I was particularly interested in macroeconomics and what policymakers could do to smooth out economic shocks, perhaps given my own previous experience trying to find employment during a recession. That led me to focus much of my research on monetary policy. In July 2020 I joined the economics department at Dalhousie University as an Assistant Professor, a position that allows me to continue to research (and now teach about) these topics.

## Alumni Profiles

### Soulafa Abbasi (MDE 2008)

I was new to the city, province and country. A landed immigrant on her way to Canadian citizenship.

I had a bachelor of arts in economics and a minor in philosophy from the American University in Cairo and was ready for a master's degree. After some research, I learned that Dalhousie University was one of the very few North American Universities that had a master of development economics program. I phoned and asked to meet with the department chair.

Professor Ian McAllister was very much interested in my background: a Syrian-born new graduate who grew up in Saudi Arabia in the 80s and 90s and lived in Egypt. I had no accent and spoke English fluently. The more professor McAllister spoke about the MDE program, his vision and wealth of experience, the more I felt encouraged to apply.

Like the great mentor and teacher that he is, Professor McAllister believed in me with much enthusiasm and encouragement. He was a role model to me and my cohort, so humble and knowledgeable. His portfolio to learning approach was so avant-garde and one that I enjoyed and thrived on. He would always say, "never underestimate the power of a written word." A lesson that has worked well in my career life.

I was always attracted to subjects that focused on the evolution of non-profits, on building capacity within challenging contexts and limited resources, on the cultural and human aspects of working in the field, on the sector's role in stepping in when some public and private institutions could not or would not. Learning about the different types of NFP institutions, their reason of being and becoming, was extremely interesting. There, I also found my calling: to serve that sector. I wanted to be part of an imperfect sector that made a difference in the communities I lived in and sometimes beyond. My first step into the sector was a fellowship in microfinance with Aga Khan Foundation Canada. 13 years later, and many volunteering and work experiences since, I am still happily serving this sector. Bio shared below:

Al-Abbasi is a published author of a learned treatise on micro-finance, institution-building and development. Her experience as a leader was developed in several roles: regional co-ordinator for the UN Association of Canada; board member of Credit Union Atlantic; board member of the Nova Scotia – Gambia Association; and vice-chair of Fusion Halifax, a youth organization focused on improving city life. She has served as the Atlantic Youth Ambassador for Passages to Canada and an Aga Khan Foundation of Canada Fellow.

Al-Abbasi has worked with International Ocean Institute Canada, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, and Canmore Folk Music Festival Society; she also served as a board member of the Canmore Business and Tourism and as member of the Bow Valley Immigration Partnership. More recently, she led the Canmore and Area Health Care Foundation as their executive director.

Al-Abbasi was recognized as an Association for Healthcare Philanthropy 40 Under 40 honoree in 2019, as one of the Top 50 Atlantic Canadian Leaders under 40 in 2015, and as one of Atlantic Canada's emerging leaders by the 21 Inc Leaders Program in 2014. She was shortlisted as a Top 75 finalist for the RBC Top 25 Canadian Immigrant Awards of 2016. She was also selected as a visionary local leader to present at the CBC/Radio-Canada 2017 Starts Now.

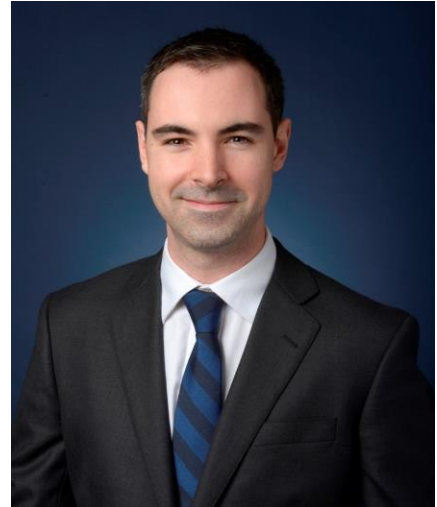
Al-Abbasi has been featured in several publications, including The Globe and Mail, as one of the "Faces of Immigration," in the national campaign of the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, and in the Canadian Immigrant Magazine. She was also recognized as a community leader, such as one of Halifax's "Power People" in Halifax Magazine, a Canadian "Agent of Change" in the Bridges that Unite national exhibit – a partnership between Canada and the Aga Khan Development Network.

Al-Abbasi enjoys living in Canmore, Alberta, with her mountain family: spouse, Patric Stettler, and their two children (Hans) Nuri Wolf and Juliet April Lily Stettler. She is a proud alumna of the Dalhousie M.D.E. program and feels fortunate to have been mentored and supervised by Professor Ian McAllister who continues to be a positive influence and inspiration for her.



## Gerard Walsh (BA 2010)

Like all first-year students at the University of King's College, I had an elective to choose at Dalhousie and I picked Principles of Microeconomics on a lark. It didn't take long for me to realize it was the path for me. It was grounded and numerical in a way that philosophy was not while still being fundamentally concerned with the big questions of human flourishing. The next few years were heady times to be a student of economics. Lehman brothers collapsed as I was taking classes on monetary policy and financial economics which certainly gave the material added relevance. I got to know many professors in the department, and I spent many nights working away in the "GE basement" with a great bunch of classmates and graduate students.



The flip side of learning in interesting times was the sad state of the job market when I graduated. It took two tries, but I managed to land a job as a research assistant at the Bank of Canada in the Canadian Economic Analysis department. I worked on the monitoring team which meant forecasting the Canadian economy over a six quarters horizon. It was the best start in the profession I could have asked for. I learned the ins-and-outs of spreadsheets and databases, some programming, and I made great friends who I remain close with.

As my time at the Bank of Canada wound down, I started applying to graduate schools. I was faced with an agonizing decision between a PhD, MA, or the Master of Financial Economics (MFE) at University of Toronto. After talking to former graduates of the latter, and getting over some initial intimidation, I took the plunge and moved to Toronto. Once there, I found a program filled with people like me who were looking for a way to take their knowledge and interest in economics to the private sector.

My first job after graduate school was as an economist at RBC. I'll never forget the feeling walking down Bay Street on the way in for my first day. I covered the Canadian and U.S. economies for RBC along with elections, climate change, and risk modelling for the next four years. Our team was small, and I learned a lot from my colleagues about forecasting, presenting to audiences, and working in a huge institution.

Two years ago, I left RBC to take a job on the economics team at Canada Pension Plan Investments, a crown corporation which invests the CPP fund's surplus. Our team puts together the forecast and conducts research on many subjects with an eye to maximizing investment returns for the fund. It is a great place to work and it is a rare privilege to have my work as an economist translate directly into investment decisions.

## News

- [In Memoriam: Alasdair Sinclair](#)

Regrettably, Alasdair Sinclair, Professor of Economics, Professor Emeritus and past VP Academic, died on 14 March 2021. To view Alasdair's online obituary, please visit below link: <https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/obituaries/alsadair-maclean-sinclair-53108/>.

- [Introducing The Exchange, a new journal by our Undergraduate Student Society](#)

### **The Exchange: An Undergraduate Journal of Economics!**

Aim: The Exchange is dedicated to publishing exceptional undergraduate research in Economics, Political Economy, Finance, Public Policy, and any other field with a focus in Economics, all in the hope of driving undergraduate academic research forward at Dalhousie University.

Scope: This is a great opportunity for all of you to get published as an undergraduate student! (Finally, there's a use for that awesome term paper you wrote last year). We are inviting all undergraduates (and recent graduates) to submit their work to The Exchange for a chance to have your hard work published!

#### **Submission Guidelines**

The Exchange accepts a large range of research types, including:

- Term papers
- Book/Literature Reviews
- Individual Research
- Opinion Papers
- Honors Theses

Submissions may be in any format, but some editing should be expected upon acceptance. Each paper will be reviewed by a member of our editorial committee. A few key things to note regarding your submission:

- The maximum length is 25 pages, including references and appendices.
- We do our best to keep your name and all personal identifiers anonymized throughout the process until publication.
- You will be contacted promptly if your paper is selected.

You can send your submissions, and any questions, to: [TheExchange.DUESA@Gmail.com](mailto:TheExchange.DUESA@Gmail.com)

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### **Congratulations to Maxwell Scholarship Award Recipients 2020-21**

Yawen Hu, Jiacheng Man, Harper Metler, Munavvar Shakhzodova, Xiaohan Teng and Jiayi Xu are the recipients of a Professor W. Maxwell Award for 2020-21.

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### **Marfels Bursary**

Marfels bursary fund was established at Dalhousie for graduate students in Economics in memory of Dr. Christian Marfels, who passed away in May 2020. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the fund and urge those who have not already done so to give another serious consideration.

Donations may be made to the Christian Marfels Memorial Graduate Bursary in the Department of Economics at Dalhousie University either online at [giving.dal.ca/Marfels](http://giving.dal.ca/Marfels) or by calling the Office of Advancement at 902-494-6970.