



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Research Summer Reflection

Seemal Akhtar Sheikh

September 1st, 2026

What does it mean to belong?

On August 28th, 2024, I found myself in the midst of airport chaos, lost in the sea of students with a twinkle and much confusion in their eyes. I stumbled outside, hit by the surprise of cold air in August and a clear blue sky. I caught a taxi to the University of Toronto Mississauga's Magrath Valley: excited, confused, and oh-so-tired.

That began my two-year journey in Canada. Across these years, my persistence in being late has made me miss many a bus, hailing Ubers across the GTA. In those Ubers, I have shared the sincerest of conversations with immigrants: some who look like me, some who don't; some who say the salaam in the gentlest tone before I even could, and others who wish their passengers would stop talking. Across small talk, I am often asked: so what are you studying? I carefully respond, Economics and Political Science! And most times, I am met with the same enthusiasm that tells me that Canada needs more and better politicians, those who understand the needs of immigrants like us.

Of course, my experience with ubers is clouded by the fact that I live in a predominantly immigrant neighbourhood and therefore, conversations about immigration are far more common. And of course, the radical right-wing anti-immigrant narrative that has washed through our neighbour (and perhaps a lot of the world too; the UK is not far behind in its anti-immigrant agenda, but I digress!) is also finding its way here; so I do not wish to say that this is the only conversation I've had. But if I had a dollar for every time I had this conversation (that immigrant needs are not understood by political parties in Canada), I would perhaps have enough to pay for the insanely expensive Ubers anyway!

The point is: a lot of these conversations made me wonder why, in a country built on the immigrant struggle, it is that politicians don't understand us. And perhaps, I have felt a personal sense of apathy too. It is true that I come from a country that has had no prime minister complete their term, has had 4 different military dictatorships, and has promised election scandals in every cycle that passes. So I was always curious! Sure, Canada is no Pakistan, but truly, is politics ever better? And if so, how do you let go of the trauma associated with living in a crumbling democracy?

This led me to stumble upon my research topic. If I, an immigrant from a country with a "working" democracy, found it hard to adjust, then what about those who came from war-torn regions? Who had seen the full failure of their political systems? So I went down this rabbit hole and started exploring.

Well, while interesting, I cannot say it clouded my time. After all, I am still a UofTears student!

So I eventually gave up and returned to my life of balancing a full course load with two part-time jobs.

Not long after, it was February, and I thought: omg, when was Laidlaw due? Well, I'm sure it can't be now; I haven't seemed to have gotten the reminder I set. As it turned out, it was indeed that same week. I spent the entire night trying to finalise my project idea: going down the rabbit hole of my notes app where I type every random curious thought I get. But one idea I kept coming back to. Is it true that if you see failure of a state, you cannot trust another one? In the morning, I rushed to my lovely political science professor's office, who very kindly agreed to still advise my research!

Well, my mistakes make me who I am, and I made a lot of them this summer. Across May, I spent time obsessing over when my REB would come! I couldn't start without it, and as it would be, at the end of May, I called up the RAISE desk asking for answers! When would my application be reviewed? In response, I learnt the application was never submitted. I immediately rushed to email my advisor, who submitted it promptly, and within days I had my approval!

Then came the hard part: figuring out how to recruit participants. As someone who had just landed in this country just two years ago, my social network was not expansive enough to cover all groups. Yet, I started reaching out: friends, friends of friends, newcomer centers, and even Facebook groups (who thought Facebook groups would get me the most responses?). Slowly, my research was starting to come together.

As I scheduled interviews, sending out the same emails over 50 times, I learnt that my biggest fear—that no one cared about this research—was not true. Instead, I was met with an overwhelming response. People were actually very passionate, and even disappointed upon getting rejected. I got emails of participants being angry over being refused space, something that was so monumental to me because more than anything it showed that people cared; it meant that my research was more than a passion project, it was a responsibility! I knew I owed it to the community to do my due diligence and create something that actually has weight.

So as I went into my group interviews, I was anxious but excited! I spent days wondering if I would be able to ask the right questions. But as it turns out, in my excitement of having an overwhelming response, I had perhaps become too optimistic. When I went into my first group interview, I only had one participant show up; for the next one, there were five. It made me realize that sometimes, even when things look great on paper, they might not be great in reality. As the day concluded, with me having conducted only two out of three group interviews with fewer than half the participants than I had anticipated, I started to think about how and whether this research would come together at all.

To problem-solve, I emailed my advisor, asking whether I could change my research design to individual interviews because that would allow me to foster a conversation with participants myself rather than rely on a group setting. My professor agreed, but that also meant I had to re-apply for REB. I received it in a couple of days again, and then came the gruelling process of trying to recruit participants again. Within my recruitment, I was met with people who were disappointed that the methodology had changed, people who did not want to talk one-on-one, and even people who joined meetings, but then left immediately after. However, I was able to successfully conduct seven individual interviews, which helped me get enough of a data set for me to review and do research on.

From that point onwards, it became easier for me to compile my research. I analyzed the text a few times before I went into annotating each interview and seeing the commonalities between them. I did this to figure out the major themes, and then I collected evidence from all interviews to fit into those themes. Simultaneously, with the help of some lovely friends who took out an enormous amount of time, I learned how to use RStudio. I truly cannot be more grateful to be surrounded by that kind of support and care!

So I did that, and I compiled my research, and I wrote my report, and I made my posters, but at the end of it, I think more than just doing the research, there are a couple of things that I have learned.

The first thing that I learned is that I am a big complainer! I love complaining! But that also means that sometimes I become very anxious, and I trap myself in this bubble of thoughts where I feel like the problem is so much bigger than me. Yet, there were so many instances this summer that proved to me that my problem-solving skills are better if I can escape this anxious bubble I lay out for myself. So over the summer, I have practiced meditation and mindfulness practices so I can remind myself that I can confidently sort whatever comes my way! At the end of it all, I have become more confident in my ability to take on stressful tasks alone and to be able to do things my way and trust myself when I am doing them, and I think that that's a big win that has come out of my research journey.

Most importantly, I think that finding out that immigration and reintegration are not uniform experiences was pivotal for me because it made me feel validated in the emotions that I feel. After all, oftentimes as an immigrant you see things differently. But the simultaneous feelings of loneliness and a lack of belonging make your thoughts seem less valuable, by society and by yourself as well. Just learning about how every immigrant experience is impacted by the kind of lives they lived before immigration, but also the kind of lives they live after immigration, has helped me see that immigrants are not a monolithic group of people. It also helped reaffirm my belief that politicians need to consider the uniqueness of the immigrant experience in Canada, instead of always treating us like one singular group. Yes, politicians and newcomer centers need

to go the extra mile to assimilate different groups of people into the country, but before that, they need to understand what unique experiences exist and how they interact with the integration process. So, to answer, what does it mean to belong? Perhaps it just means to be heard and considered. And I hope I can do at least a tiny part in amplifying that voice.