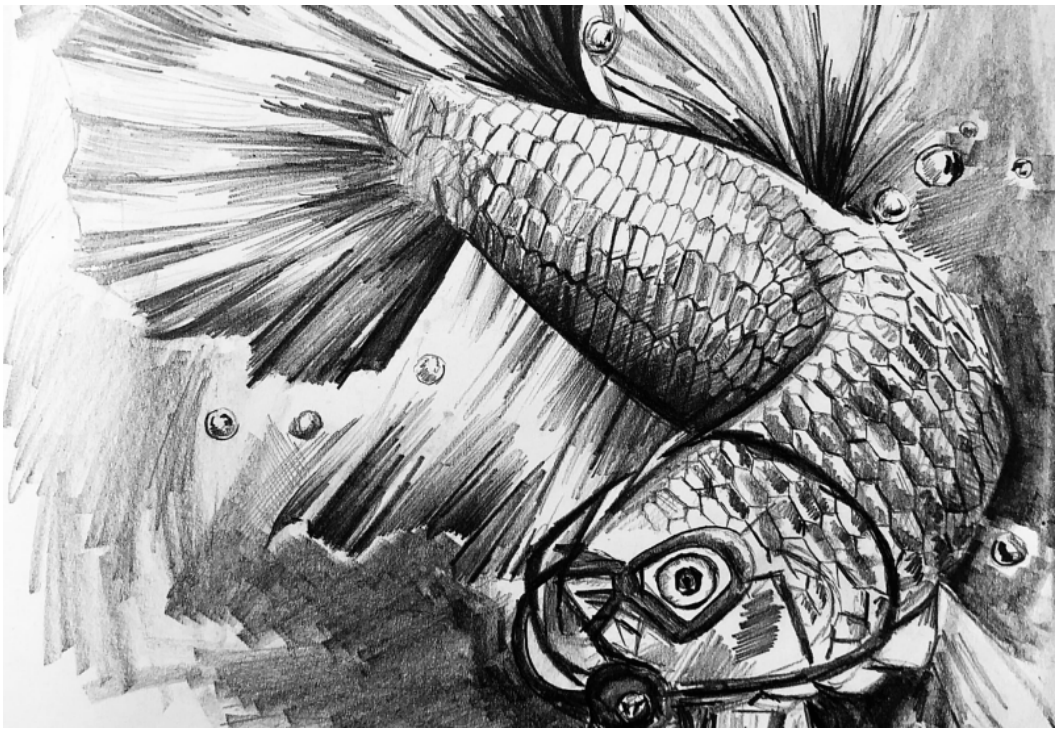
Research corner: being a peer researcher with Migration Yorkshire



Many thanks to Hani Michael, an Eritrean refugee who lives in Ethiopia, for drawing this sketch to accompany Jack’s blog. It illustrates Jack’s analogy which compares migration peer research to a fish researching the sea.

In our latest blog, Jack shares his experience of applying for a peer researcher role at Migration Yorkshire, and how he feels about the job.

What being a peer researcher with Migration Yorkshire means to me

by Jack Liuta

For me, peer research is about allowing people with research skills to take an active role in a research project which aims to bring a positive change in their own community. The role of peer researchers is then to bring more connection between the research participants in the community and the project. This allows the members of the community which is concerned by the research to feel valued and to trust the research project as being important to them. If I can use a metaphor, I would say it is like allowing a fish to participate in research about the sea.

My name is Jack, and I am originally from the Congo in Africa. I currently live in one of the vibrant and diverse cities in the UK

which is Leeds. My family and I are now learning to make West Yorkshire our new home. I joined Migration Yorkshire as a peer researcher in September 2021. I am going to share in this post my journey on how I came to this role and what I have learnt so far about working as a peer researcher. Before I came to the UK, I was working in my home country in the human rights sector. I conducted research activities about human rights violations in a totally different context than here in the UK. I will point out that besides my role as peer researcher, I am also a PhD researcher at the University of York. I have a particular interest in all that concerns the rights of migrants in Europe, particularly those from Africa. Because Migration Yorkshire works to support the integration of migrants in Yorkshire and Humber, I was immediately attracted to work for the organisation.

Since living in the Yorkshire and Humber region, I have had on different occasions the opportunity to connect and interact with migrants and refugees from diverse backgrounds. I observed that while the region attracts migrants because of its diversity, there is still much to do to facilitate their social integration. Willing to bring my contribution in this domain, I started volunteering with a local organisation which provides social support to newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees in the region. I came to identify some gaps in the existing support mechanisms and my desire to work in a sector that could allow me to contribute to changes in policy and practice kept on growing.

When I came across this peer researcher position with Migration Yorkshire that was advertised on the Leeds City Council website, I had no doubt that this was the sort of job I was looking for. This was during the lockdown. I submitted my application and a week later I received an invitation for an interview. The interview took place online and a week after, I received an email informing me that I had been successful. The rest of the process was simple, and I did not struggle to complete all the required documents.

Coming back to the interview, I liked the fact that it was not an ‘in a rush’ interview. Rather, the interviewers took their time and asked specific questions to gain a good knowledge of me as a candidate in terms of my skills and experience. Another thing that captivated me about my interviewers is the fact that they were all passionate about their work in the organisation. I could feel it by the way they were talking about the organisation and their work. No need to mention here that humanity and passion are indispensable assets for those working to improve people’s lives. What also struck me was the fact that they valued my past experience as a researcher outside of the UK. This meant a lot for me as a migrant. I really feel proud being part of this organisation.

My experience of working as a peer researcher has been socially enriching and has greatly helped to improve my research skills. One of the research projects I have been involved in is led by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in partnership with Migration Yorkshire. The research focuses on social isolation and loneliness in communities in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

We hope the project will make a valuable contribution in terms of raising awareness on these issues amongst local authorities and the public.

I am working in tandem with a team of talented researchers including other peer researchers. I can see how my lived experience as a migrant combined with all I learn from the organisation help me to engage in an effective way in the research activities I conduct in the community. I can say regarding this, that being a peer researcher for me is also about combining the lived experience with appropriate research skills, the passion with the expertise that we develop as being members of research team.

I understand from my experience so far that being a peer researcher is not only a privilege but most importantly a responsibility. It is a way of serving the community through research. As this fish who is investigating the turbulent sea of community integration - see my earlier metaphor -, my desire as part of the migrant community is to play a role as a peer researcher alongside my colleagues in the substantial change that we all want to see in the sector across the region.

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