Doctoral Students' Identity Positioning in Networked Learning

Agenda

- My interest in online doctorates
- The nature of the doctoral degree
- The challenges facing online doctoral students
- My Research description and results
- Implications

My interest in online doctorates

- In 2008, Athabasca University opened the first "Doctor of Education (EdD) in Distance Education" program.
- I was hired as the program administrator
- My task was to help organize and manage the program as well as field inquiries.
- As the program began, I noticed that some students lacked preparation.
    - Lack of financial preparation
    - Lack of job stability
    - Family instability
    - Lack of support
- A year later, I began my own doctoral degree by distance at Lancaster University. I was interested in learner identity in online, distance programs. I focused on learner identity of doctoral students in distance programs.
    - In this presentation, I will present my results.

The nature of the doctoral degree

- Intensity & duration is greater than other degrees
- Working at a conceptual level
- Considering the nature of knowledge
- Making an original contribution to the body of knowledge
- New identities

Significance of doctoral degrees

- The source of new knowledge, practices, and technologies.

- Retention can be seen as an indicator of a university's commitment to student success or even of the quality of the institution itself (ICEF Monitor, 2014); a reflection of the institution's prestige.
- Doctoral studies may have significant impacts on society as learners potentially emerge with increased 'resilience, creativity, determination and problem-solving abilities that shape the subjectivities and identities of individuals and [such individuals] make a longer term contribution to the public and social good' (Halse & Mowbray, 2011, p. 521).

Types of doctoral degrees

- From most traditional:
    - Traditional PhD with individual supervision
    - PhD by publication
    - Taught doctorate characterized by courses, research training, and a shorter thesis
    - Practice-based doctorates with written piece and other expressive elements (art, performance, portfolio, etc.)
    - Practice-based doctorates with written piece and other expressive elements (art, performance, portfolio, etc.)
    - Professional / work-based doctorate with taught elements and "applied" research

- Modalities
    - Individual/group face-to-face meetings
    - Face-to-face classes
    - Telephone
    - Videoconferences (online) – individual/group
    - Email / text message?
    - Virtual reality?

Challenges with distance learning

- Students (across levels) pursuing degrees through online learning are thought to be 15–20% less likely to complete their programs when compared to students enrolled in face-to-face learning (Varney, 2009).
- How can distance-based doctoral students observe the norms of academic conduct in their field?

Why offer doctoral degrees online?

- Notwithstanding efforts to modify traditional PhD courses to accommodate the demands of knowledge production and social accountability in the current economy (Chiang, 2003), the newer professional doctorates, particularly those offered at a distance, can offer greater flexibility to accommodate the needs of professionals and practitioners. Increasingly,

programs encourage cohort interaction as a means of reducing isolation and increasing support (Loxley & Seery, 2011; Neumann, 2005; Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

Why should we study online doctorates?

- Statistics / proliferation of online doctorates
    - Enrollments in distance education programs continues to grow at much faster rates than traditional, face-to-face programs; their findings show online enrolment increases at yearly rates of 10%, compared to less than 1% growth in the overall population of higher education (Allen and Seaman, 2011).
    - Increases in doctoral enrolments around the world, accompanied by an increasingly diverse doctoral student demographic with wider age ranges, more part-time enrolments, different purposes, and a variety of employment choices following graduation contribute to the difficulty of measuring the complex ways in which doctoral research affects society (Halse & Mowbray, 2011).
    - A report published in 2012 by the Canadian Virtual University makes it clear that online students are more likely to have characteristics and be in situations, which challenge completion and that online retention is more negatively impacted by a lack of supports such as early interventions and social connectivity than is face-to-face learning.

Completion rates (over 10 years)

- Such statistics are difficult to measure, but here are some that I have found:

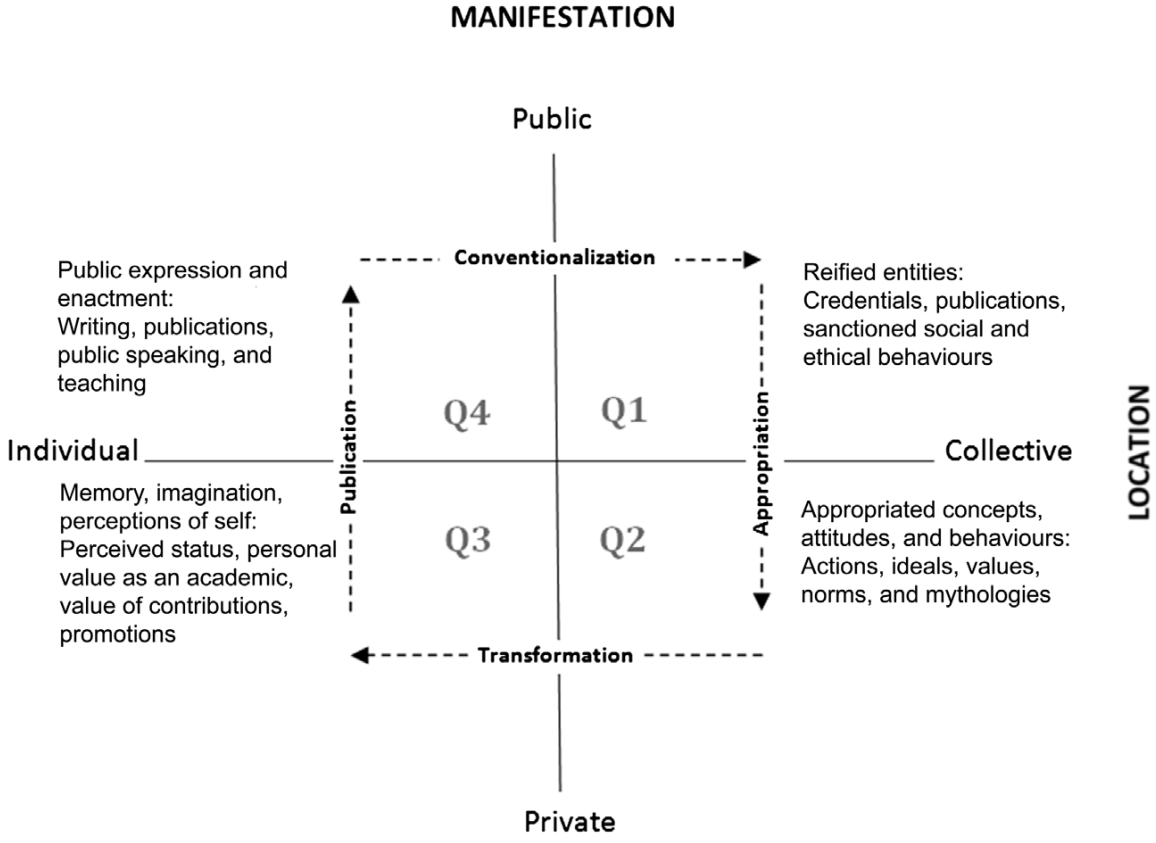
    - Canada: 34% to 71%
    - Australia: 30% to 70%
    - England: 76% for full-time students; 48% for part-time students
    - United States: 54%

The important thing about these and other statistics is that it suggests there is a high *non-completion* rate. And, this is as source of criticism. Other criticisms revolve around the inability of recent graduates to secure academic work.

(Statistics from: Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (2004); Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, & Farley (2004); Gittoes (2007); Council of Graduate Schools in the United States (2008).

Theoretical framework of my work

- Philosophical background – social constructionist view of identity: co-construction of identity through social discourse.
- Theoretical framework – Social positioning (Harré, 2010).



The SPC (annotated) adapted from Harré (2010, p. 144).

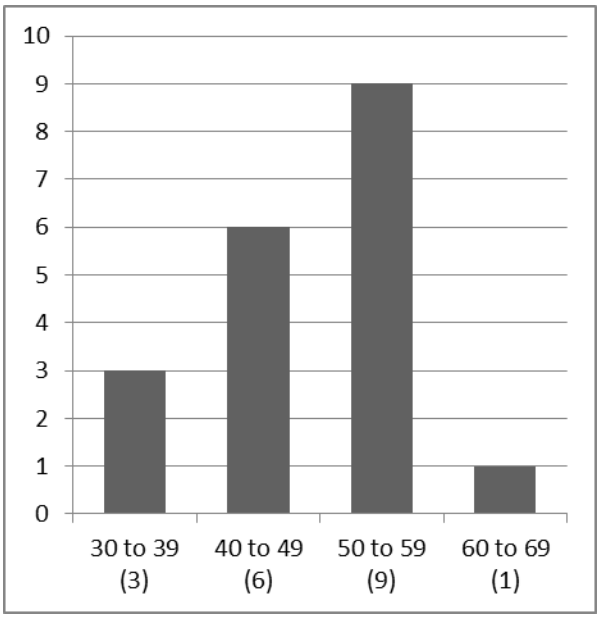
This diagram, as it currently appears, neglects the *other* social environments in which the distance doctoral students remain embedded. (Face-to-face doctoral students can become somewhat sequestered from their other social environments.)

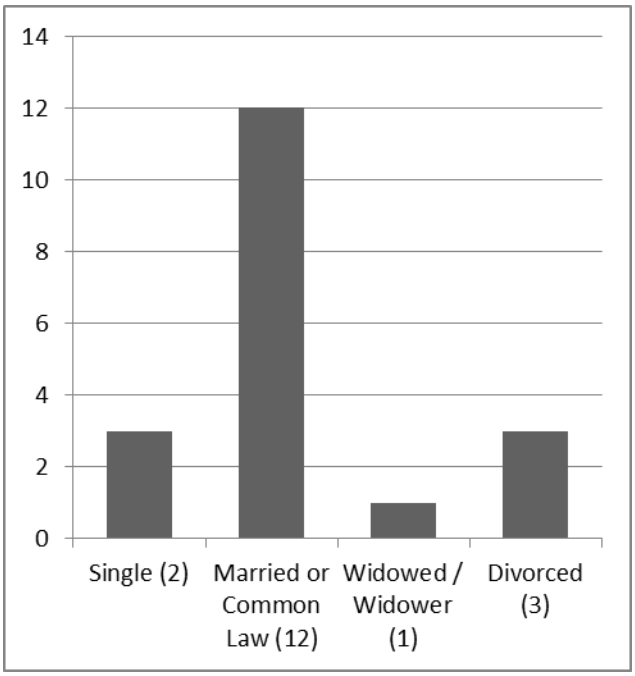
The study

- Research question:
  - The main goal of this research was to explore how doctoral students in NL programs experience challenges to their current identities, norms, and relationships across the various boundaries of their academic and non-academic worlds.
  - The main research question was: 'How do doctoral learners in NL programs describe identity positioning?'

- Participants
  - Two programs in a Canadian distance university

- Education (n = 15)
- Business (n = 4)
- Participants were in various stages of their degree programs
- 8 male; 11 female
- Only one was not working
- Mostly in the 40-49 and 50-59 age groups





Field	Type	Number
Education	Post-secondary professor, lecturer, instructor	5
	Learning designer	4
	Teacher (K-12)	2
Health Care	Nurse	1
	Educator	1
Management	Director (post-secondary)	1
	Executive officer	2
	Accountant	1
Other	Writer	1
Not indicated	N/A	1
Total		19

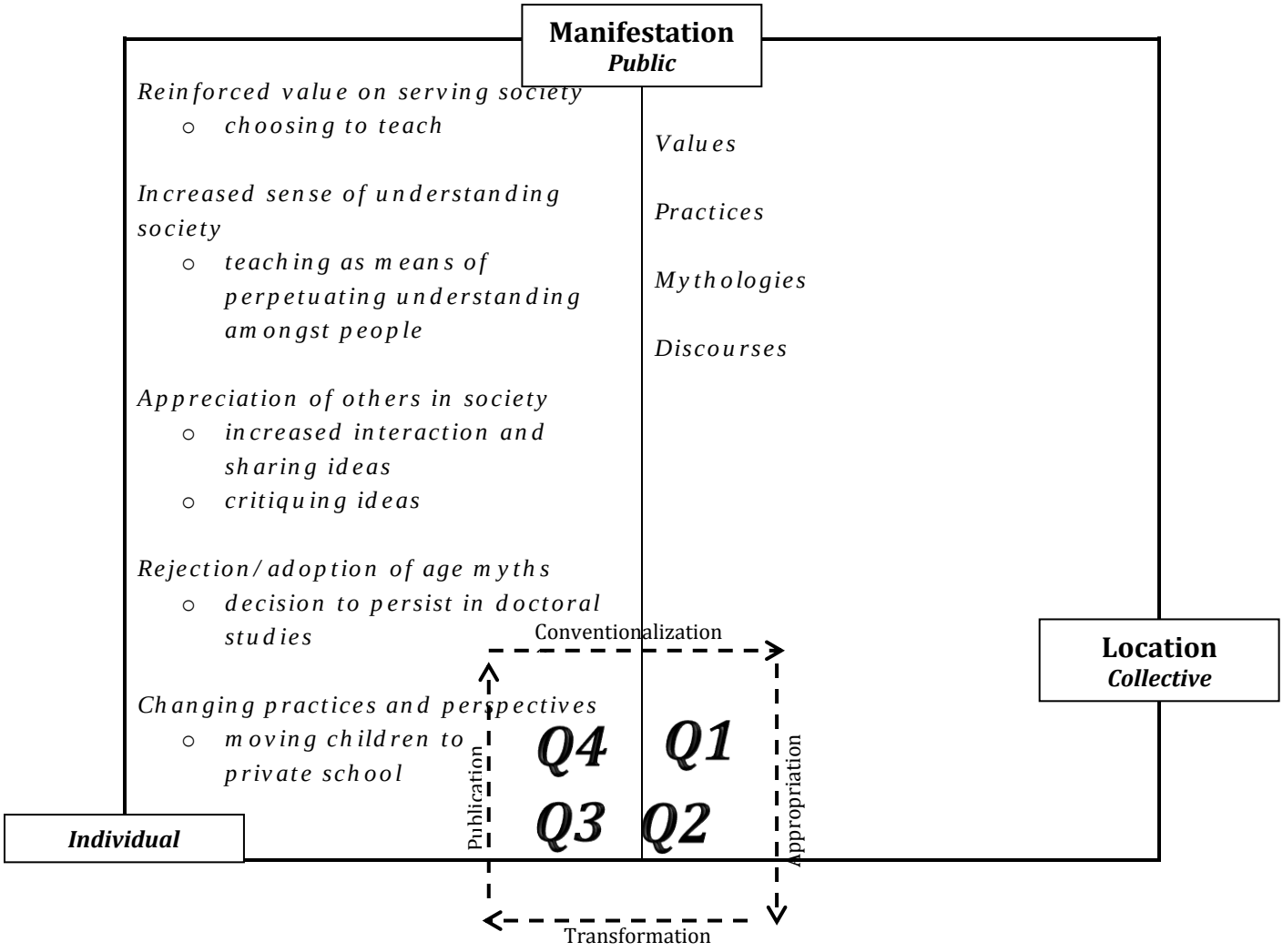
Table 4.2. Occupation of interview participants.

- Methodology
  - Preliminary questionnaire
  - Qualitative, open coding (influences from phenomenography)
  - Discourse analysis

- Data collection
  - Semi structured interviews
  - Described their experiences

- Data analysis
  - Themes, patterns, co-occurrences noted.

The Results – Positioning within general society



Sensing: ○ *anxiety* *Questioning* ○ *reasons for study* ○ *benefits of study (social and personal)* ○ *studying after 50 years of age* ○ *others' behaviours / reactions* ○ *information circulating in the media*	*Observed practices and values:* *Usefulness of doctoral studies* ○ *status* ○ *intelligence* ○ *practicality* *Expected behaviours at certain ages*

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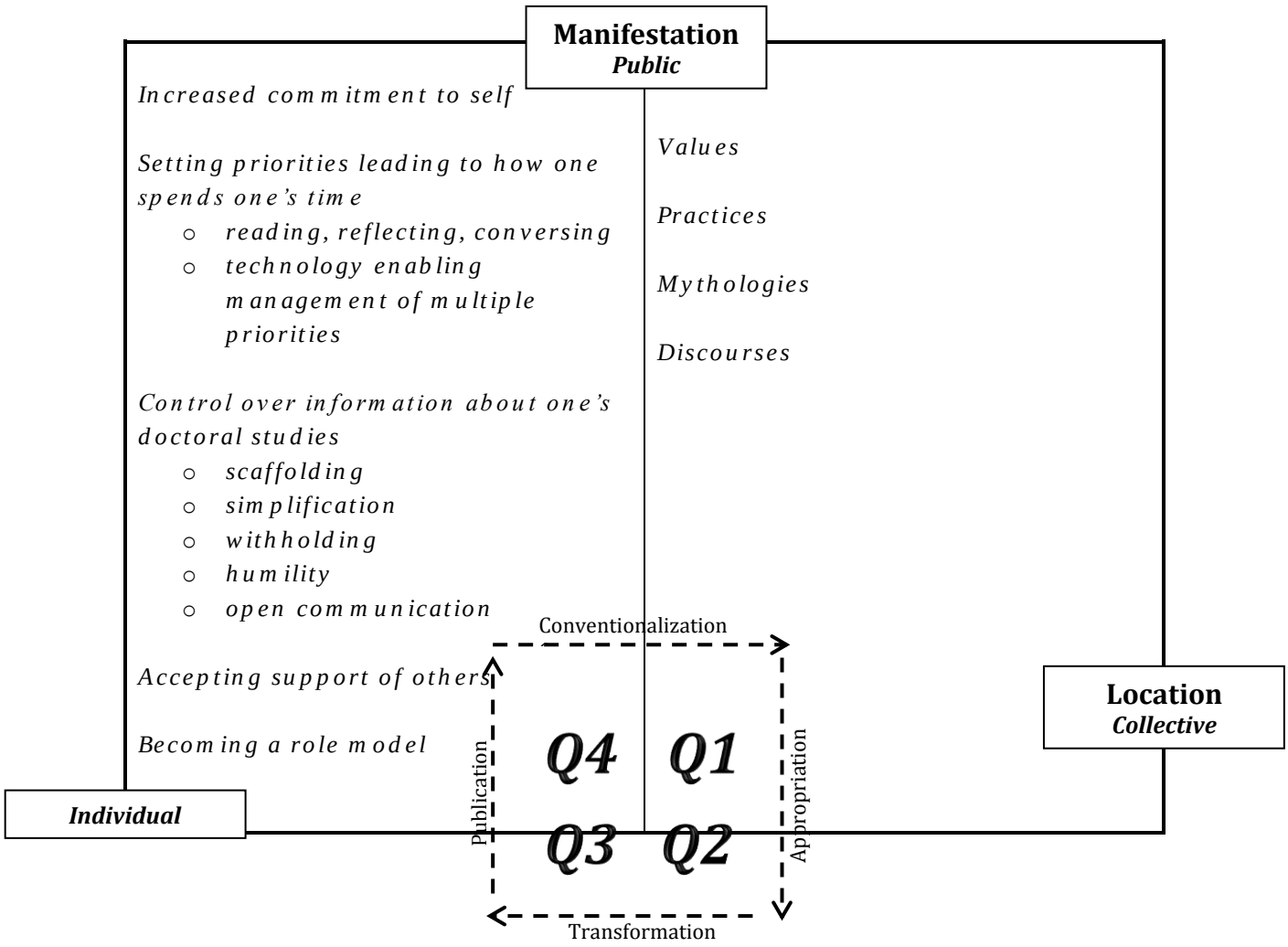
4.3.2 Positioning amongst friends and family

The most salient narratives in this context were related to how friends and family members reacted to the participants' doctoral studies. Figure 4.8 provides a visual summary of the participants' descriptions.



Feeling alienated *Examining priorities* ○ *time* ○ *activities* ○ *people* ○ *self*	*Observed reactions of others to one's doctoral studies* ○ *disinterest* ○ *rejection* ○ *lack of understanding* ○ *familiarity with academic identity* ○ *surprise* ○ *excitement* ○ *criticism* ○ *support* ○ *acceptance*

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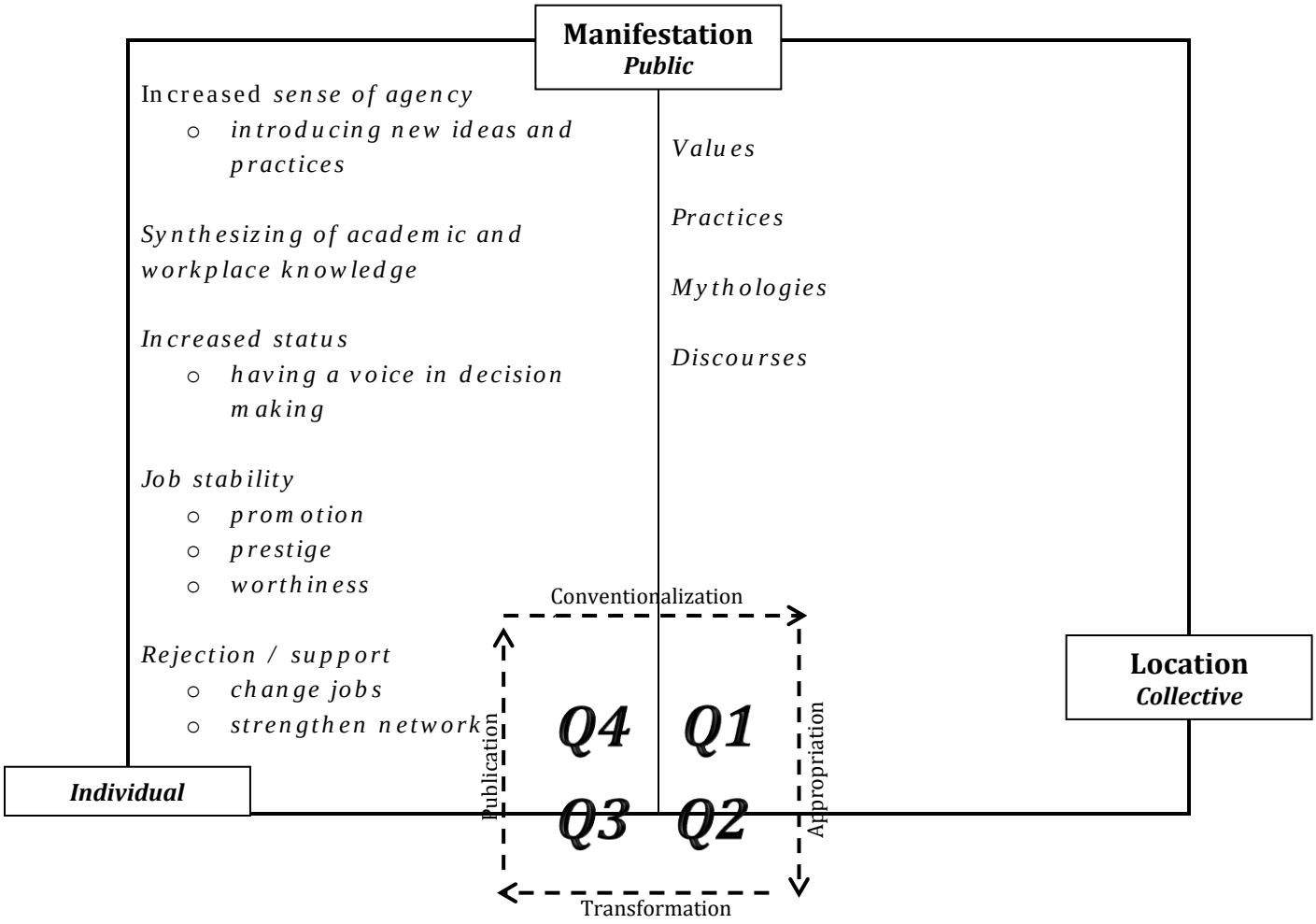
4.3.3 Positioning within the professional context



Craving for intellectual engagement *Alienation, sense of becoming different* *Desire to influence the workplace* *Examining old practices and workplace identity*	*Observations in the workplace:* *Few others with doctorates* o *hostility and sense of threat* o *lack of understanding of doctoral work* *Others with doctorates* o *support network* o *lack of alignment* *Traditional/expected practices and attitudes* o *non-adherence leading to conflict*

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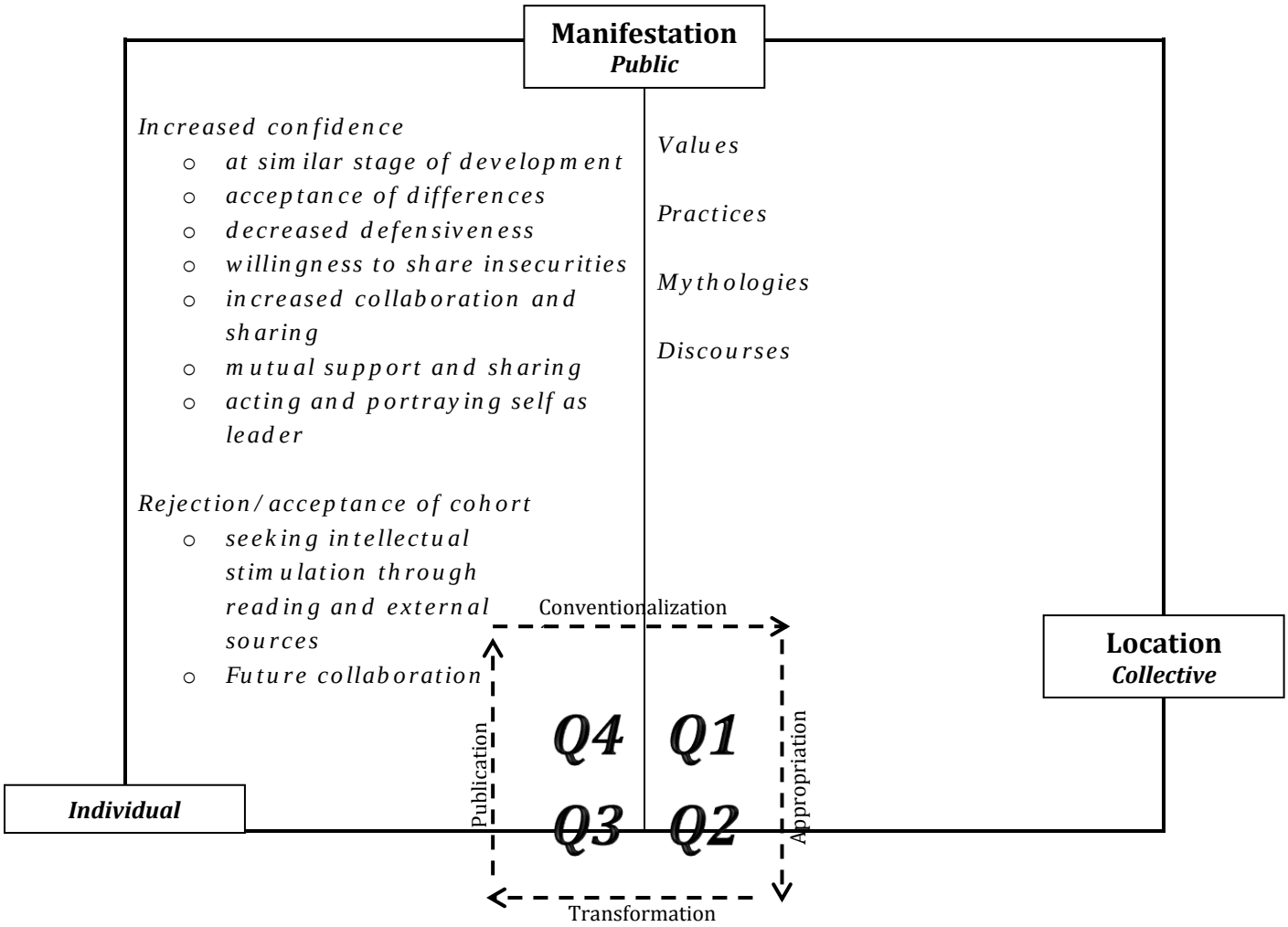
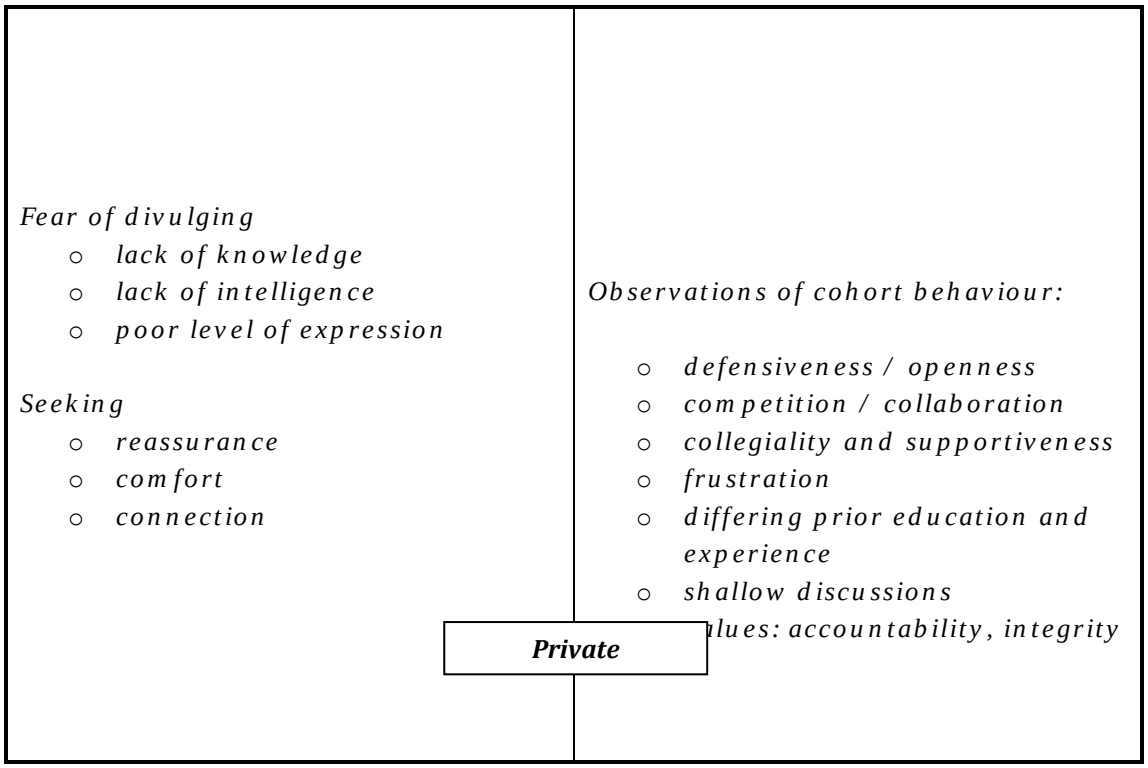
4.3.4 Positioning within the doctoral cohort

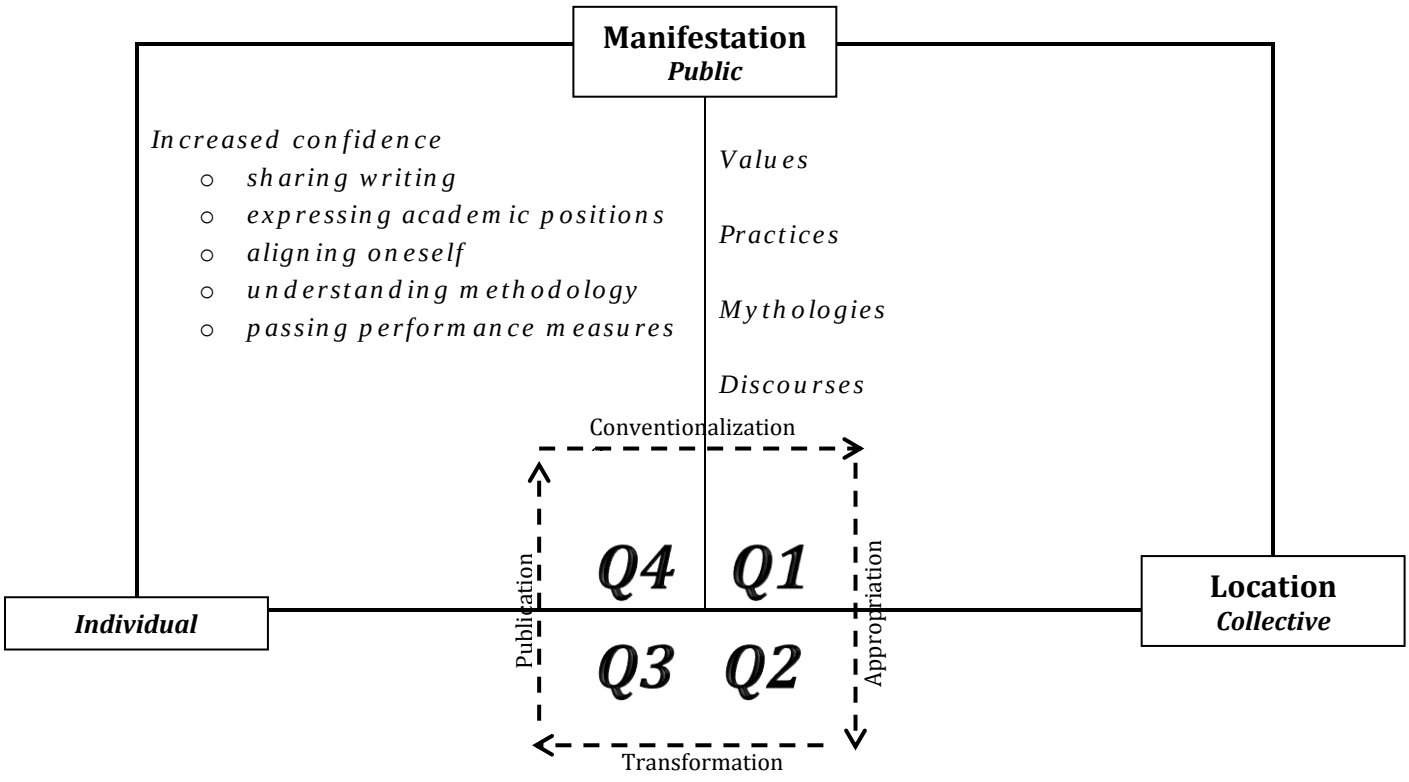
During the interviews, the doctoral cohort emerged as a significant location of positioning. Figure 4.10 provides a representation of the participants' descriptions of their experience.





4.3.5 Positioning within the academic department

During the interviews, the participants revealed some of the struggles they experienced whilst attempting to locate themselves within the academic department (figure 4.11).



Fear, shock, confusion of/from • *not meeting standards* • *lacking ability* • *lack of control* • *lack of preparation* • *conflicting expectations* *Questioning ontology* • *alignment with academic positions* • *conflicting positions/expectations* *Questioning epistemology* • *certainty of knowing, how one knows, what one knows* *Evaluating self against measures* • *candidacy* • *defence (viva)*	*Observations of the academic department:* ○ *expectations of behaviour* ○ *reading, discussion* ○ *relationships with professors* ○ *standards of performance*

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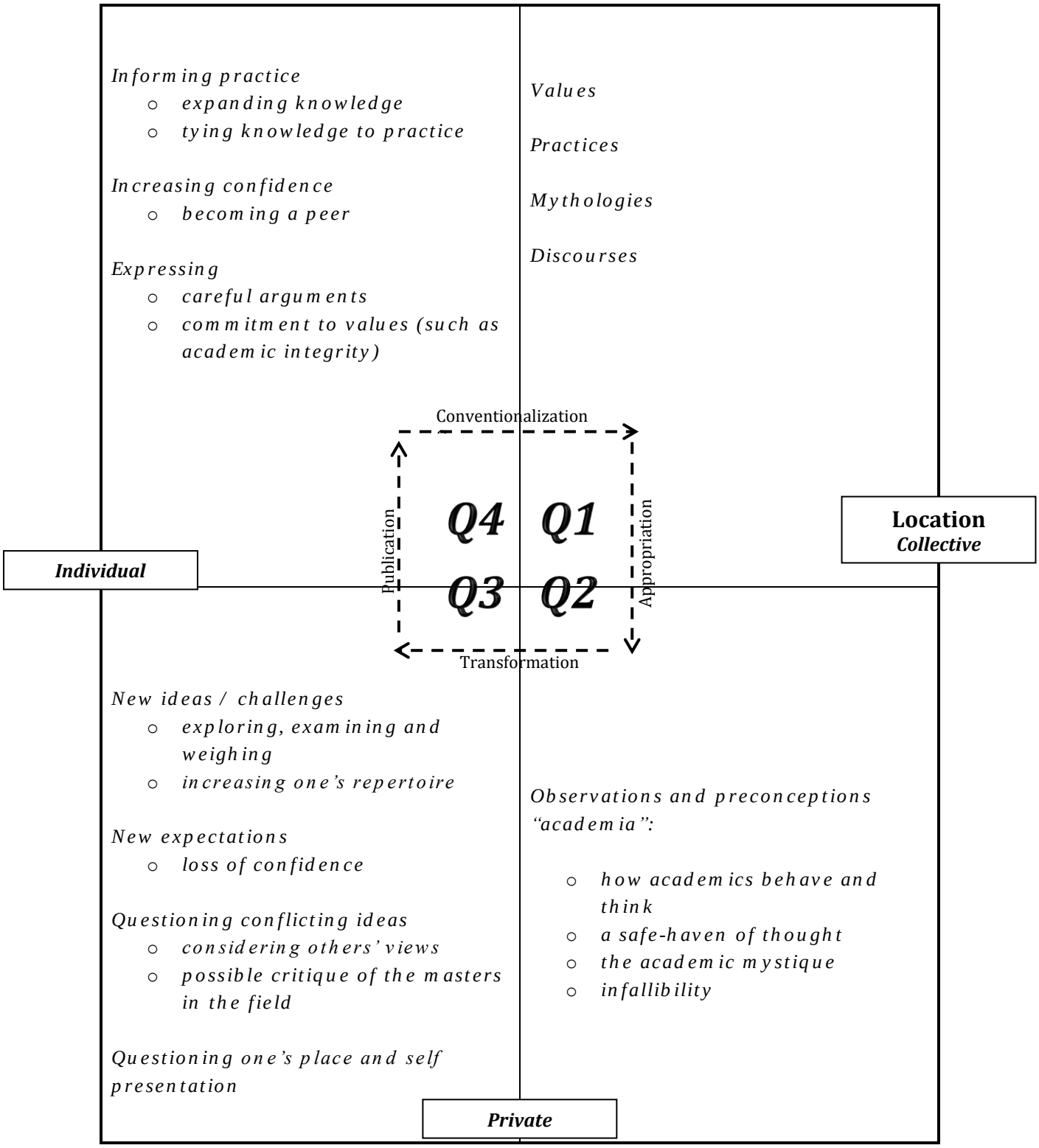
4.3.6 Positioning within the academy

Manifestation
Public


Informing practice
expanding knowledge
tying knowledge to practice
Increasing confidence
becoming a peer
Expressing
careful arguments
commitment to values (such as academic integrity)
Values
Practices
Mythologies
Discourses
Conventionalization
Publication
Q4
Q1
Q3
Q2
Appropriation
Transformation
Location
Collective
Individual
New ideas / challenges
exploring, examining and weighing
increasing one's repertoire
New expectations
loss of confidence
Questioning conflicting ideas
considering others' views
possible critique of the masters in the field
Questioning one's place and self presentation
Observations and preconceptions "academia":
how academics behave and think
a safe-haven of thought
the academic mystique
infallibility
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Implications

- Distance-based doctoral students remain embedded within multiple social contexts, which . . .
    - have various views of the value of doctoral study,
    - place demands, and expectations upon the students,
    - require careful management to ensure support

- Students can actively shape their support structures:
    - Locate a mentor(s)
    - Foster relationships with other students
    - Learn to describe their research in non-threatening and meaningful ways to friends and family
    - Consider the timing of the doctoral journey

- Institutions can
    - Provide orientation sessions that include
        - Discussion of how to manage support structures, finances, health, cohort relationships, schedules, etc.
        - Clarify standards of performance and expectations of behaviour (provide writing samples, analytical work, etc.)
        - Encourage conference participation and publication.

References

Contact / thank you