CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Doctoral Education in Context

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Abstract This chapter situates doctoral education within lived realities. Beginning with personal reflection on the gap between expectation and experience, the chapter examines common misconceptions: financial security, academic self-sufficiency, and freedom from responsibilities. The chapter exposes how such myths sustain structural inequities. Addressing the pandemic (2020–2022) and political climate of 2025, the chapter reviews scholarship on caregiving, migration, disability, and financial precarity in doctoral study. The chapter establishes the foundation for narratives that follow, positioning doctoral life as work sustained through relation and persistence within fragile institutional structures.

Keywords Doctoral education • Pandemic • Caregiving • Migration • Disability • Financial precarity • Structural inequities

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What We Think We Know About Doctoral Life

Before entering the doctoral program, I realized that what I had imagined was a fairytale. I pictured studying alongside equally driven people, flying to cities around the world to present our research fully funded by institutions, taking time off for parties because we were still students, impressing doctoral advisors with creative ideas, making my family proud, and securing an academic position right after graduation, with multiple offers waiting even before finishing my degree.

Looking back, I wonder how I could have believed in such a version of academic life. In truth, some of what I imagined does exist, but only in fleeting moments. Those glimpses of recognition or success are real, but they come at great cost and are never the whole story. Maybe I was clueless, or maybe I confused hope with ambition. Reality arrived all at once as the illusion broke. Despite the wide range of experiences among doctoral students, common misconceptions persist. One pervasive assumption is that doctoral students are fully funded, free from financial worry, and able to dedicate themselves entirely to academic life. However, research has consistently shown that this is far from reality. Many doctoral students experience significant financial strain, juggling multiple jobs, managing student debt, or handling caregiving responsibilities (Perez-Felkner et al., 2020; Sverdlik et al., 2018). The belief in full-time academic availability overlooks the material conditions under which many students operate, including food and housing insecurity (Gardner, 2008; Gopaul, 2015). These assumptions also contribute to institutional practices that fail to accommodate students with familial or financial obligations, thereby intensifying inequalities in graduate education (Acker & Haque, 2015; Johnson et al., 2023). Moreover, the academic culture often rewards total immersion, ignoring that students from underrepresented groups or lower socioeconomic backgrounds may not have the luxury to disengage from other life responsibilities (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hazell et al., 2020).

Another widespread belief is that doctoral students are already "experts" or close to becoming faculty and therefore no longer need support. This assumption ignores the ambiguity and precarity that defines much of the doctoral journey (Gardner, 2008; Gopaul, 2015). Students may teach classes and publish papers, yet they remain closely supervised. They must navigate shifting program requirements and unclear institutional policies (Golde, 2005; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Even though they perform professional academic work, doctoral students often have limited autonomy. I

am sure many doctoral students would agree that the institutional structure positions them as both advanced and dependent. One day they are told, *You are a doctoral student; you should be able to solve this on your own*. When they take initiative and try to pursue something independently, the next day they are told, *You are not quite ready for this yet*. They are expected to act as independent scholars while being treated as apprentices, resulting in contradictory expectations (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Gardner, 2008).[1] At whose convenience?

Many still assume doctoral students are self-sufficient or self-indulgent. In reality many are simply tired, too tired to explain themselves or correct the misunderstanding. What appears distant or arrogant often comes from exhaustion. When everything feels uncertain and slow to move, silence becomes the only way to keep going (Acker & Haque, 2015; Hazell et al., 2020). Still, people often see doctoral students as privileged, driven, and distant from ordinary concerns. When difficulties arise, the response is often simple: *You chose this path, so do not complain*. I heard that from time to time (because I complained from time to time). Each time it sounded reasonable until I began to see what it ignored. The "you chose this path" mindset extends far beyond academia and erases the structural conditions that shape doctoral experiences, including unequal access to funding, housing, mentorship, and institutional inclusion (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Sverdlik et al., 2018).

The misconceptions about doctoral students are not benign. They influence policy decisions, shape the distribution of resources, and affect how doctoral students are treated in everyday academic interactions (Gardner, 2008; Gopaul, 2015). The mythologized image of the ideal doctoral student (endlessly available, expected to act as both scholar and dependent according to institutional needs, and emotionally impervious) serves as an exclusionary benchmark that marginalizes those who diverge from the institutional model of the "ideal" doctoral student (Acker & Haque, 2015; Sverdlik et al., 2018). When students fail to conform, the result is often shame, exhaustion, and a sense of isolation (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hazell et al., 2020). Addressing these misconceptions is a

[1] I have been fortunate to have an advisor, Dr. Beamie Kim, who has consistently supported my independence with generosity and respect. Her mentorship has been a lasting source of academic growth and we continue to meet regularly for research discussions even after the completion of my degree. I also know many colleagues who supervise doctoral students with great commitment. My reflections here address structural contradictions in doctoral education rather than individual relationships.

step toward recognizing and legitimizing the breadth of doctoral experiences and imagining a more inclusive academic culture (Perez-Felkner et al., 2020). The narratives in this volume share fragments of belonging, misunderstanding, and the decision to keep going. I hope they open space for more stories and different ways of existing.

The Pandemic Context and the Political Present

The narratives in this volume were written following the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), a period of profound disruption to academic life and everyday existence. Doctoral students navigated uncertainty on multiple fronts: Research plans collapsed as fieldwork sites closed, caregiving responsibilities intensified as schools and daycares shut down, mental health resources became inaccessible, and the social infrastructure of graduate education—seminars, conferences, informal gatherings—moved online or disappeared entirely. The pandemic did not create the structural inequities facing doctoral students, but it magnified them. Students who were already marginalized—international students facing visa precarity, parents managing childcare, those with chronic illness or disability, those dependent on campus resources for food or housing—bore disproportionate burdens.

Several contributors directly address the pandemic's impact. Kaleb Ostraff and Alexis Ostraff describe moving to Illinois just as COVID restrictions intensified, navigating isolation, limited social connection, and the challenges of balancing doctoral work with caring for young children during lockdowns. Hsin Fang, Jung Shan Sung, and Shatha Alrashdan reflect on the compounded difficulty of being international student mothers during a time when borders closed, travel became dangerous, and separation from extended family networks deepened. The pandemic surfaces throughout the collection as lived reality manifesting how students experienced time, space, relation, and possibility.

We thought it was over. We thought we could finally breathe. But even before that final exhale, 2025 arrived with a dramatic political shift. Federal policy changes under Project 2025 consolidated executive power in ways that affected academic freedom, free expression, and the sense of safety among non-citizen members of university communities. Immigration enforcement intensified, with increased scrutiny of visa holders and heightened fears of deportation. The consolidation of executive power in 2025 also shaped the making of this book. Chapter 11 centers the experience of

an international doctoral student. The email exchange between Somi Lee and Nupur Sachdeva emerged from visa-related trauma that prevented Nupur from completing her proposed manuscript. I invited her to continue the work with me so that her experience could remain part of this project. Xiaoxiao Bao and Lingran Zhang's dialogue in Chap. 6 similarly traces the ongoing negotiation of belonging when legal status, language, and cultural differences intersect with academic labor.

Before the consolidation of executive power in 2025, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs had already begun to erode in several states since 2023, including Florida, Texas, Ohio, Arkansas, and Arizona. These states enacted legislation that led institutions to restrict or defund DEI efforts, dismantling existing offices and removing support systems. Even where DEI remained in name, the practice often stopped at slogans. Policies were written, committees were formed, and reports were published, yet little changed in how people felt seen or supported. Institutions spoke of equity while sustaining the same hierarchies that caused exclusion in the first place. The growing neglect of genuine inclusion forms the backdrop for Part IV, When Inclusion Fails Quietly. Both chapters reveal how words of belonging can harden into systems of correction and control. The authors write from within institutions that promise safety but reward the loudest voices and the fastest claims.

The pandemic and the current political moment emphasize the importance of collective and mutual aid. Many authors describe how survival relied more on peer networks, informal communities, and relationships formed outside official channels. The Critical Disciplinarity Scholars collective, described in Chap. 10, models one such space, a graduate-led initiative that centers food, dialogue, and presence over productivity or professionalization. Peer support sustains doctoral study (Lee & Maken Ali, 2025) suggesting what academic community might become if *human connection* were placed at its center.

The convergence of pandemic disruption and political upheaval has exposed the gap between institutional promises and lived reality. The social and political realities described above shape the ground from which this anthology emerges.

Situating the Anthology Within Doctoral Narrative Research

This anthology contributes to an expansive and growing field of narrative research on doctoral student experiences. Narrative inquiry and autoethnographic approaches of the lived experiences of doctoral students have grown substantially over the past two decades. With tens of thousands of related studies in existence, narrative inquiries reveal the multifaceted complexity of doctoral education (academic, emotional, social, and economic challenges) and illuminate how institutional structures intersect with personal identities. This volume organizes its collection through "curatorial gestures" of caregiving, migration, DEI, and peer support, which function as relational frames rather than fixed categories. The narratives move fluidly across these areas, showing how doctoral life is experienced through overlapping contexts of family, transnational movement, and community interdependence. While each section highlights a distinct emphasis, the chapters often cross boundaries, reflecting how doctoral identities are lived at the intersections of multiple circumstances. The following gestures contextualize the narratives presented in this volume, situating them within broader conversations about belonging, inclusion, and the lived realities of doctoral study.

Caregiving and Motherhood: The Intersection of Academia and Family

Since the early 2010s, scholars have focused extensively on motherhood and caregiving during doctoral study. CohenMiller (2014), in her phenomenological study *The Phenomenon of Doctoral Student Motherhood/Mothering in Academia*, examined the experiences of doctoral students who became mothers for the first time at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Her research shows that doctoral student mothers face higher levels of stress and pressure than their non-parenting peers and identifies three invariant themes: Gendered Experience, Strategic Experience, and Sense of Belonging. Later, CohenMiller et al. (2022) argued that doctoral student motherhood/mothering in academia is a gendered experience that is strategic and embedded with a varied sense of belonging.

Recent scholarship continues to expand these themes. Hillier (2023), through a narrative inquiry into the experiences of academic mothers in Ontario graduate programs, identified five key sub-themes: strategic

planning and time management, conditional and circumstantial flexibility, sacrificing personal desires for the sake of family and children, maternal guilt, and strong reliance on immediate family support. She underscored the "invisible load" of motherhood, the often-unseen labor of family management, which runs throughout each narrative. Hillier (2023) observed that mothers emphasized the importance of strategic planning and time management skills to handle daily responsibilities. The pandemic made balancing caregiving and academic work even more difficult. Research by academic mothers in Australia showed that COVID-19 brought severe social and economic hardships for mothers in academia, who juggled caregiving demands alongside expectations for scholarly output. Women who become mothers during doctoral study face a distinct experience: They learn to navigate both academic culture and motherhood at the same time, shaping their identities as students, women, and parents all at once (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018).

Not confined to North America, Tabaeva and Durrani's (2025) comparative study of doctoral student mothers (DSMs) in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan demonstrated how cultural expectations shaped academic identities. Participants in Uzbekistan reported pressures from the "kelin" (daughter-in-law in the husband's parental home) role, which overshadowed their doctoral student identities. The study showed that doctoral student mothers in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan faced restrictive gender norms, inadequate institutional support, financial hardship, and dismissive attitudes from supervisors, all of which complicated their efforts to pursue academic work while raising children. Experiences of navigating cultural expectations, economic pressures, and institutional indifference also appeared in Part II of this collection, Family, Mothering, and Graduate Life, revealing how parenthood shaped doctoral study across multiple dimensions.

Recent research by Tram et al. (2025) surveyed 469 female graduate students regarding motherhood, finding that slightly over half (50.32%) indicated no interest in having a child during graduate school, with five emerging themes of concern: finances, travel, child care, academic progress, and academic consequences. This quantitative study provides important context for understanding the structural barriers that shape doctoral students' decisions about parenthood.

Migration and Transnational Experiences: Negotiating Identity Across Borders

International doctoral students shape their identities through continuous negotiation across cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries. Studies in this area indicate that the process involves ongoing reflection and adaptation as students navigate unfamiliar academic cultures and languages (Sun & Trent, 2020). The emotional landscape of transnational doctoral education carries both struggle and accomplishment, with moments of deep difficulty intertwined with success (Wu, 2022). Identity formation extends beyond formal academic work into daily life abroad, encompassing gendered, sociocultural, and professional dimensions that influence how students interpret their past, present, and future (Liu, 2022).

Language poses particular challenges for international students establishing academic voices. Chinese English as a Foreign Language doctoral students, for instance, have struggled to develop critical argumentation, integrate multiple sources effectively, and position themselves authoritatively in their written work (Othman & Lo, 2023). Financial pressures compound these difficulties; some students withdrew from research participation due to scheduling constraints and the burden of self-funded study, revealing how economic precarity directly threatens academic persistence. For international doctoral students who are also parents, identity negotiation becomes even more complex. A 2024 study found that children's language needs created additional stress, as improvements for the family sometimes required geographic separation due to differences in education systems and inadequate support for multilingual development. The findings connect directly to the narratives in Parts III and V of this anthology, reflecting the layered academic, emotional, and personal challenges that international doctoral students face.

Identity Negotiation: Disability, Chronic Illness, and Marginalized Identities

Doctoral students who lived with disability or chronic illness navigated academic systems that measured worth through productivity, endurance, and visibility. This structure created constant tension between institutional expectations and embodied realities. Dolmage (2017) argued that higher education privileged certain bodies and rhythms of work while rendering others invisible, describing this dynamic as "academic ableism," in which

inaccessibility becomes normalized through design, pedagogy, and culture. Brown and Leigh (2018) found that ill and disabled academics often worked within cultures of silence, where disclosure invited judgment and nondisclosure reinforced isolation. Similarly, Price (2011) examined how mental disability and neurodivergence were framed as deficits within academia, emphasizing the need for "rhetorical accessibility" that redefines participation through communication rather than conformity. Kerschbaum (2014) expanded this discussion by showing how disabled scholars manage interactional identities in academic and professional spaces, drawing attention to the everyday negotiations of credibility and inclusion. More recently, Brown (2021) explored the cumulative emotional and physical toll of working under ableist norms, arguing that the discourse of resilience continues to conceal institutional neglect rather than address the structural roots of exclusion.

Within doctoral study, these conditions shaped identity as a process of negotiation that joined intellectual ambition with the need to sustain health and continuity of work. Students redefined progress and rigor according to what their bodies allowed, reframing academic persistence as relational and situated rather than uniform or linear. The studies mentioned above collectively demonstrated that illness and disability are not peripheral to academic life but central to understanding how universities define value, belonging, and success.

Within this anthology, such experiences extended the discussion of doctoral identity beyond the familiar lenses of family, migration, or professional transition. The narratives contributed to a broader understanding of how doctoral study occurred through interdependence, fluctuation, and embodied constraint. When students wrote of pain, fatigue, or difference, they revealed how knowledge production itself was shaped by lived material conditions. The collection therefore invited readers to reconsider inclusion as a practice grounded in the realities of research, teaching, and study rather than a principle expressed only in institutional rhetoric. In doing so, it called for universities to imagine academic life as responsive to multiple embodiments, acknowledging that scholarly vitality depends on accommodating diverse ways of living, thinking, and working.

Financial Precarity of Doctoral Life

A substantial body of research has examined how financial instability shapes doctoral study, influencing persistence, motivation, and well-being. Gardner (2008) and Gopaul (2015) both demonstrated that funding inequities often determine whether students complete their degrees, while Sverdlik et al. (2018) identified financial stress as one of the strongest predictors of attrition. More recent analyses have shown that doctoral students who rely on multiple income sources or unpaid labor experience heightened emotional fatigue and diminished research productivity (Mantai & Marrone, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023). Studies on graduate funding systems have also revealed that institutional aid frequently favors students without dependents or caregiving duties, reinforcing structural barriers for women, international students, and first-generation scholars (Acker & Haque, 2015; Johnson et al., 2023).

Given this extensive literature, I was struck that none of the proposals submitted for this anthology addressed financial precarity directly. The omission contrasts sharply with what doctoral students often share in conversation. That is, stories of managing tuition, rent, and family support while maintaining academic expectations. The absence itself becomes instructive, highlighting how financial hardship, though widely documented, remains difficult to narrate within academic discourse. Perhaps this silence stems from the persistent stigma surrounding economic struggle in higher education, where self-sufficiency is still tied to merit and professionalism. In this sense, the existing research and everyday accounts of doctoral study point to what remains absent in this volume: an acknowledgment that financial precarity continues to be one of the most enduring and least visible conditions of doctoral life. Although no author wrote directly about it, conversations with students reveal how financial uncertainty shapes nearly every decision, from research design to family life and mental well-being. The absence of such narratives here should not be read as omission but as invitation. There is room, perhaps in a future volume, to explore how economic vulnerability intersects with academic identity, belonging, and persistence. Addressing this area may open further dialogue about how universities imagine support, how doctoral students navigate scarcity, and how the idea of scholarship itself might shift when the conditions of living are brought into view.

Conclusion: The Contribution of This Anthology

This chapter situates doctoral education within its lived, relational, and contextual realities rather than as an abstract institutional structure. By examining caregiving, migration, financial precarity, and identity negotiation, it addresses how material and social conditions shape persistence in academic life. The discussion considers doctoral study as an evolving experience of learning, adaptation, and endurance, where intellectual and personal dimensions are inseparable. It questions the image of the self-sufficient doctoral student and brings attention to how doctoral work is maintained through interdependence.

The review presented here establishes the background for the chapters that follow. It connects recent scholarship on caregiving, migration, financial instability, and identity to broader debates on belonging and equity in higher education. The chapter shows that doctoral study cannot be reduced to progress toward expertise. It is a situated practice that develops within overlapping institutional and political environments. Through this framing, the chapter provides a foundation for understanding how the subsequent contributions engage with doctoral life in relation to structure, policy, and lived experience.

The significance of this introduction lies in clarifying the conditions from which doctoral research and identity formation emerge. Doctoral study, often imagined as a detached pursuit, is shown as work that depends on relation, presence, and persistence. This discussion encourages institutions to listen more closely to the realities of doctoral study and to recognize that academic growth depends on environments where students can think and live with dignity. By establishing this groundwork, the chapter prepares readers to approach the following narratives and analyses as situated reflections on what it means to study, teach, and exist within the contemporary university.

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