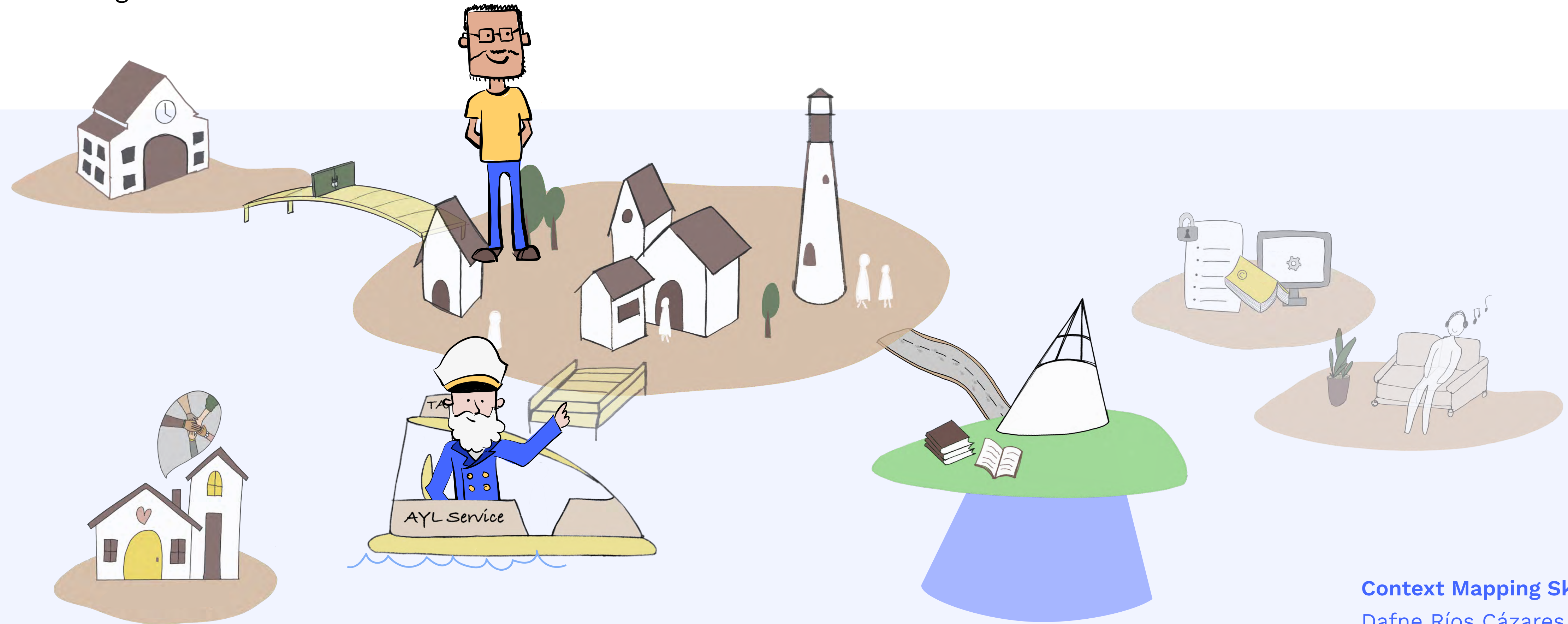


Navigating the TU Delft PhD experience

How the TU Delft Library can become a harbour
for knowledge

Navigate by using the ← → arrow keys



Context Mapping Skills

[Dafne Ríos Cázares](#)
[María Peiró Torralba](#)
[Qixiu Zhang](#)

The island metaphor

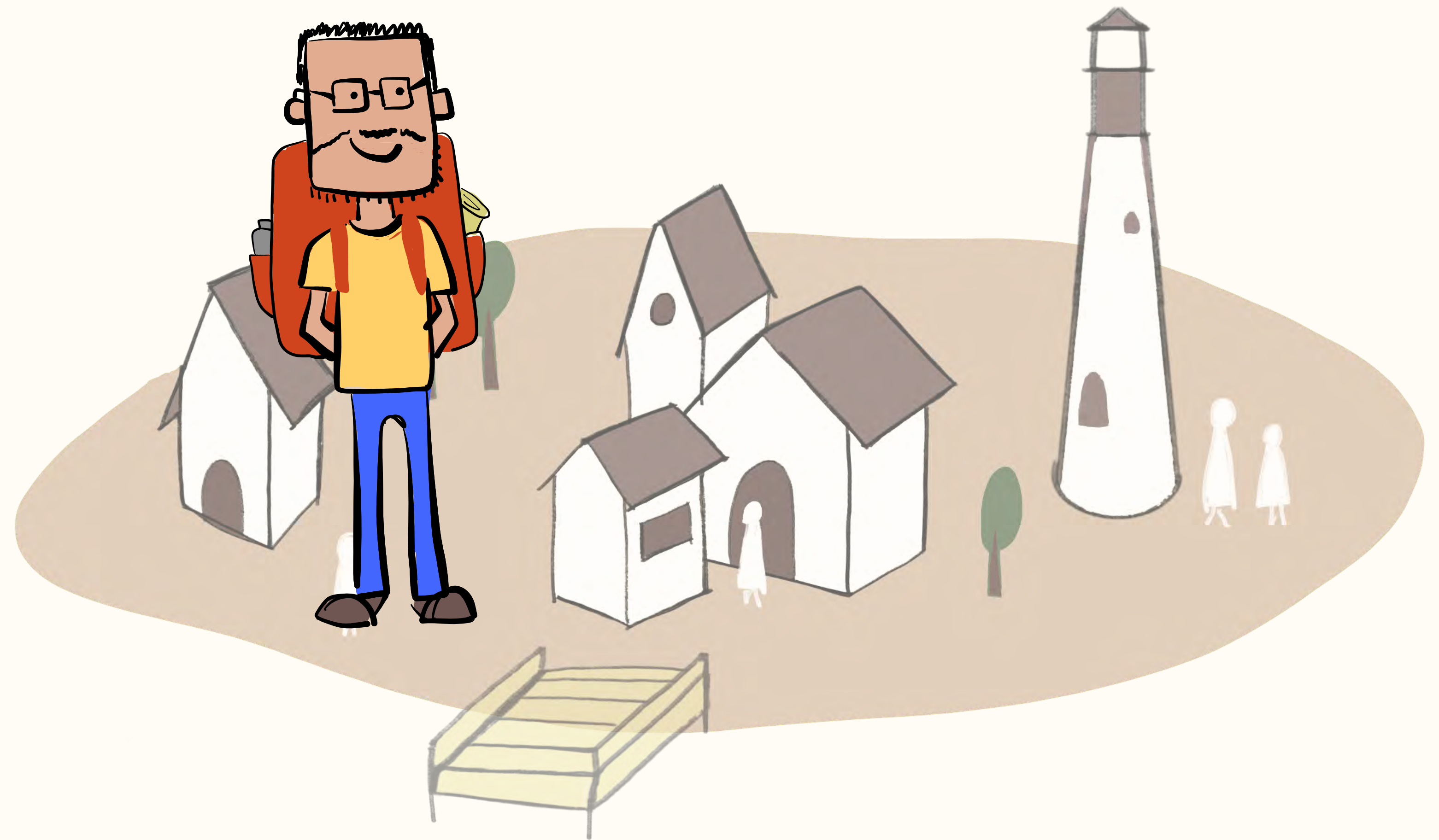
To better explain the PhD experience at TU Delft, as well as the needs and motivations of the PhD candidates, we developed a metaphor.

PhDs arrive at the PhD island alone and slightly disoriented; they have to quickly figure out how life on the island works and adapt to it.

They are also not alone on this island. There are other castaways there (PhDs) with which they can form a **community** or tribe. And every tribe has leaders (supervisors, promoters).

Beyond their island, there are many others. Some of them, the PhDs are aware of and visit often; others, they do not know about. Some of these islands include the **TU Delft Library services**.

Finally, there needs to be a guide for the PhDs to venture outside the island. We will give our **recommendations** on how that could be done.



Instructions

To navigate within each of the sections you can browse as shown in the following scheme.

Insight summary

PhDs have a strong curiosity but focus it all on their own research

PhDs are naturally very curious, but the nature of a PhD requires them to focus on a very specific domain of research. This intense specialization, combined with their efforts to adapt to life on the island, often means they are unlikely to explore what is beyond.



'You are thinking that you're not doing enough because there are a lot of things that you want to do but you never can do them all [...] but gradually you understand that OK, I wanted to originally do this.'



Progress bar within each section (clickable)

PhDs quotes

Back to index (click)

1. MEETING KAMI

2. LIFE ON THE ISLAND

3. LIFE OUTSIDE THE ISLAND

4. A BETTER LIFE ON THE ISLAND



Navigation bar (clickable)

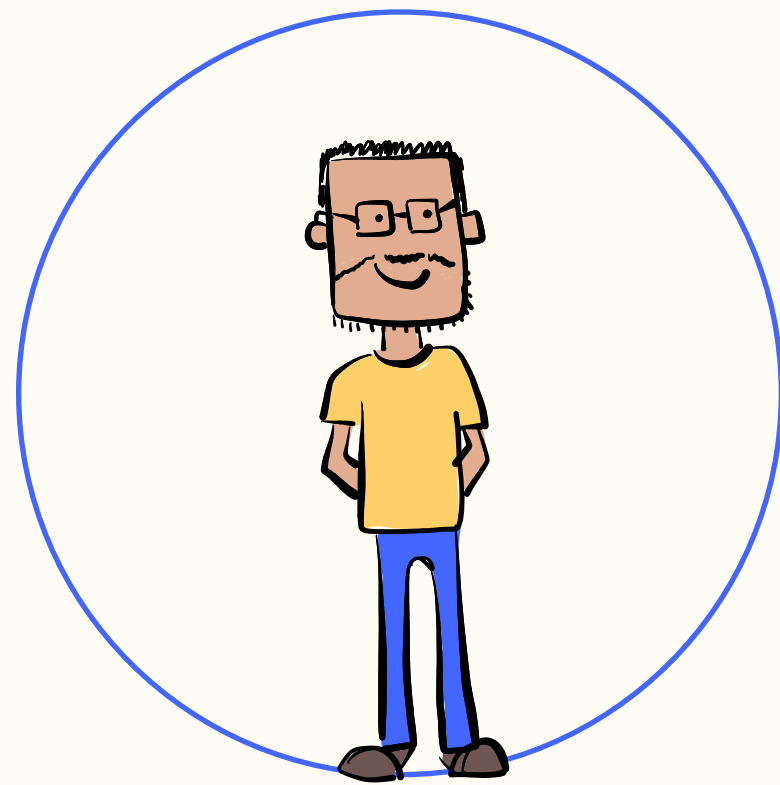
Navigate by using the ← → arrow keys

Index

Welcome to the Navigating the TU PhD experience framework!

After delving into the PhDs' lives we gathered the most important learnings in this digital tool. You can navigate the island in 4 levels:

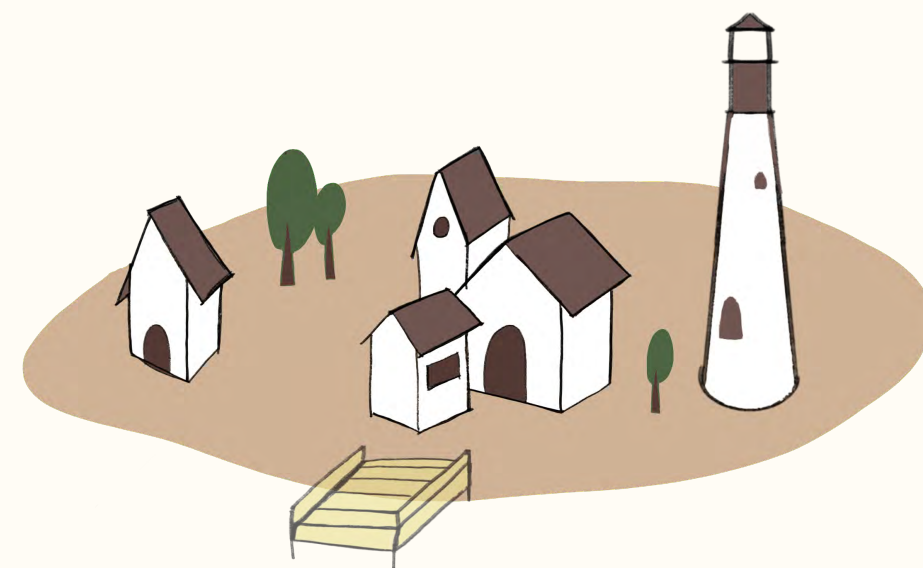
TIP: Click to go to each section



01

MEETING KAMI

Getting to know Kami, in which situation does he arrive to the academic island and how does he behave.



02

LIFE ON THE ISLAND

Understanding Kami's environment and the role the inhabitants of the island play is key to understand PhDs.



03

LIFE OUTSIDE OF THE ISLAND

Kami's perception of the islands, showing what is familiar and unknown to him.



04

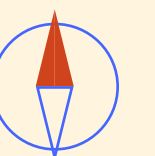
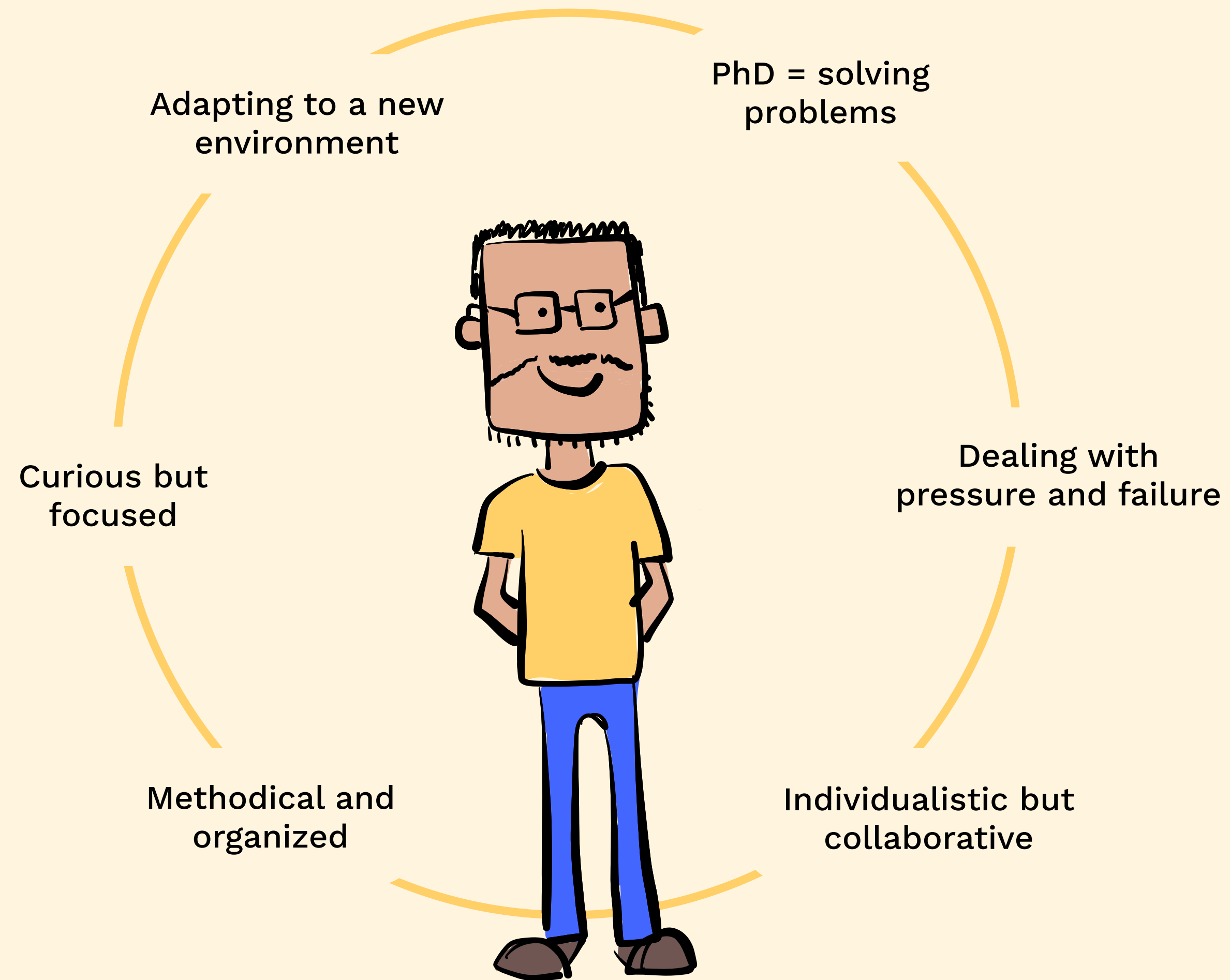
A BETTER LIFE ON THE ISLAND

Life on the island can be improved if we think from Kami's perspective.

01

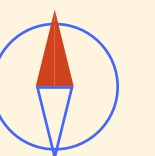
Meeting Kami

This is Kami, a PhD candidate who will be their representative for the rest of this story! In this section we will guide you through his first steps after arriving on the PhD island and gain insight into some of his personality traits.



PhDs arrive to TU Delft alone, so they have to adapt quickly

Although PhDs embark on their journey willingly, once they arrive to TU Delft they are met with an overwhelming amount of things they need to manage. Not only do they have to **get to know their new role and its responsibilities**, but also **familiarize themselves with the other people in the department**. Both of these things take utmost importance and priority for them, and become their focus.

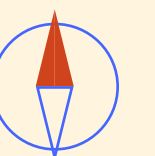


PhDs have a strong curiosity but focus it all on their own research

PhDs are naturally very curious, but the nature of a PhD requires them to focus on a **very specific domain** of research. This intense specialization, combined with their efforts to adapt to life on the island, often means they are **unlikely to explore** what is beyond.

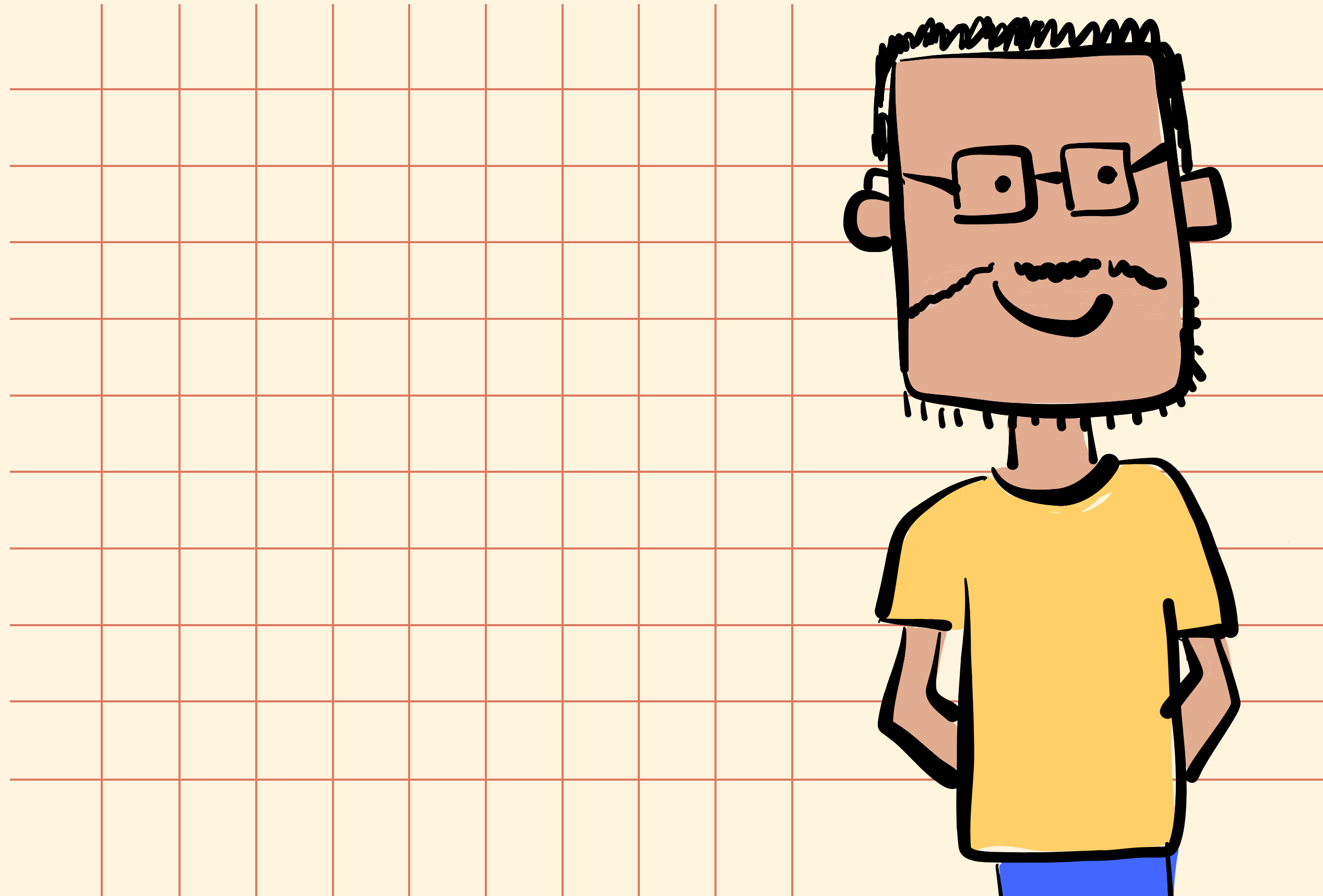


'You are thinking that you're not doing enough because there are a lot of things that you want to do but you never can do them all [...] but gradually you understand that OK, I wanted to originally do this.'

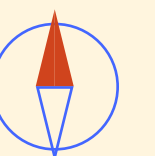


PhDs are generally very methodical and organized, sticking to routines and structure

With only four years to complete an ambitious research project, PhDs have to become **masters at self-management**. Good organization becomes crucial when time is a scarce resource. Many PhDs deal with this by becoming hyperstructured and keeping strict routines.



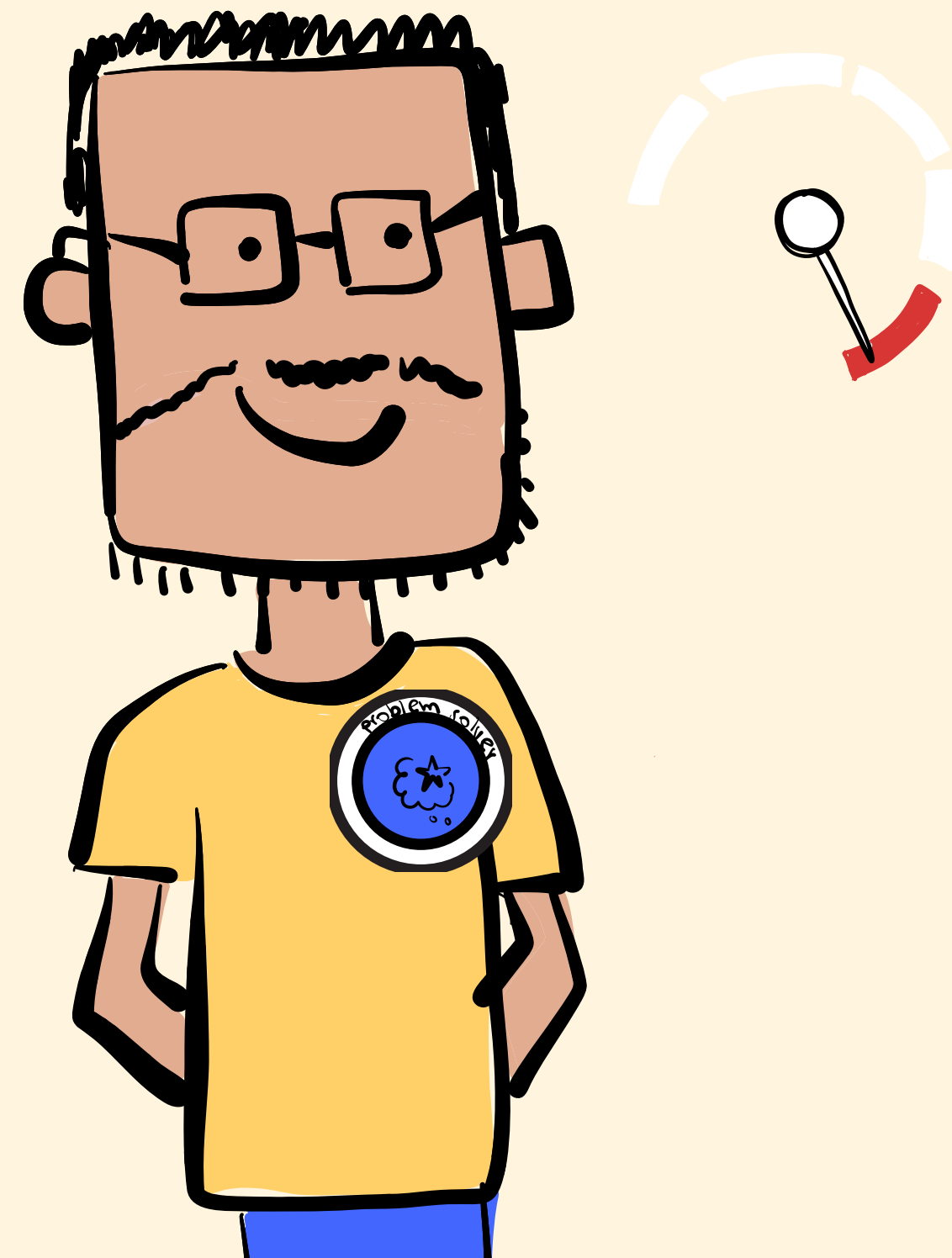
'I've become quite a big planner, like really taking from Dutch culture. What I usually do is I grab all the things I have to do, and I have a huge To Do List. But I really make it so specific, to the point where I can just shut my brain from everything but doing that bullet point.'



PhDs' responsibility and job is to solve problems; asking for help often becomes scary

Problem solving is at the core of PhD work. They take a lot of **enjoyment and pride in trying all the solutions** they can come up with and figuring things out on their own.

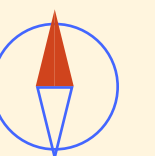
However, this pride has a darker side; the threshold for PhDs to realize they are in need of help and reach out is quite high. Often, they are **afraid of being judged** or perceived as lazy or unresourceful by others.



'It kind of feels like **my job** in a way to **solve problems**, right. So I better enjoy that or what else am I doing here?'

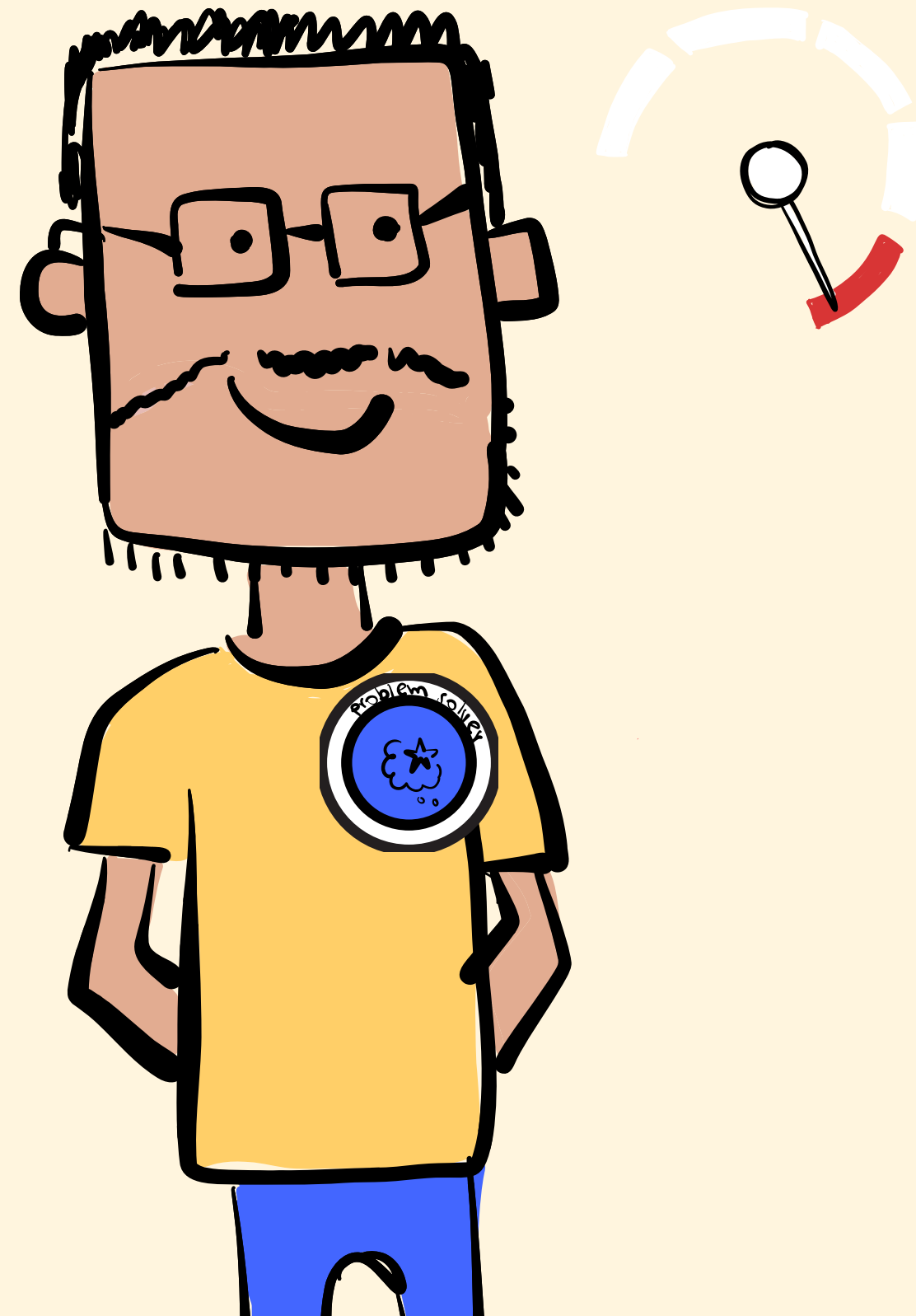
'My work is very meaningful and even though there are so many difficulties I met at last I figured it out, so I'm quite proud of myself.'

'I think **my pride kind of stopped me to reach out for help**, because sometimes I think a problem is quite easy, simple. **I'm afraid that people will judge me**. How can you ask this kind of stupid question that everybody should know?'



PhDs deal with pressure and failure so well that they do not reach out for help

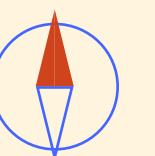
PhDs are faced with failure constantly during their research. This leads to **frustration** and **self-doubt**, and even depression. However, this becomes their **standard** and they grow used to it. The PhDs are “in survival mode” in a way; they are dealing with a great quantity of challenges but see it as their responsibility to solve them by themselves.



‘The mental health of PhD students [...] it’s something in between, you have a lot of **responsibilities**, but you still don’t have a lot of **control** over what you’re doing.’

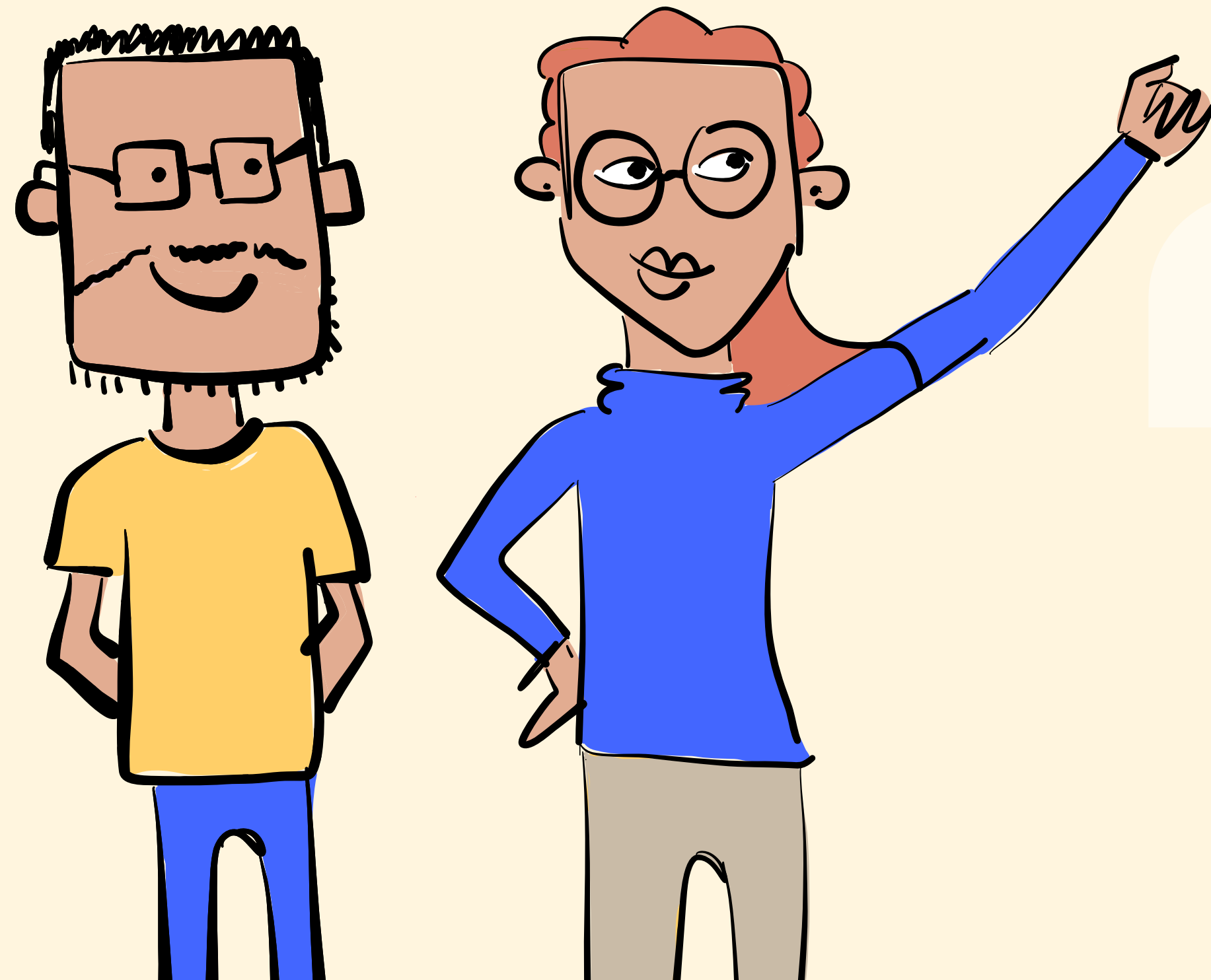
‘I think in the middle of those three months, I actually doubted about myself, about my ability.’

‘They cannot have full responsibility because they cannot have full control of the outcome of the results, unless you’re expecting them to cheat. Which sometimes seems that the system is trying to do that.’



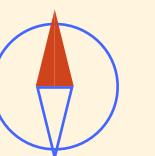
PhDs can be perceived as individualistic, but they also have a strong teamwork mindset

Although being a PhD is often an individual enterprise, it often happens that PhD candidates **work within a team** as part of a larger research project. In these cases, they have a **mindset shift**: problems should be shared, because they affect other people aside from themselves. Collaboration is highly valued and allows them to feel like they can ask for help.



‘The journey of the PhD is like a **pretty lonely** journey... because you permanently work with yourself, and then you have weekly meetings with your supervisory team and members.’

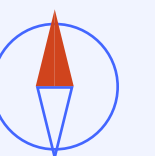
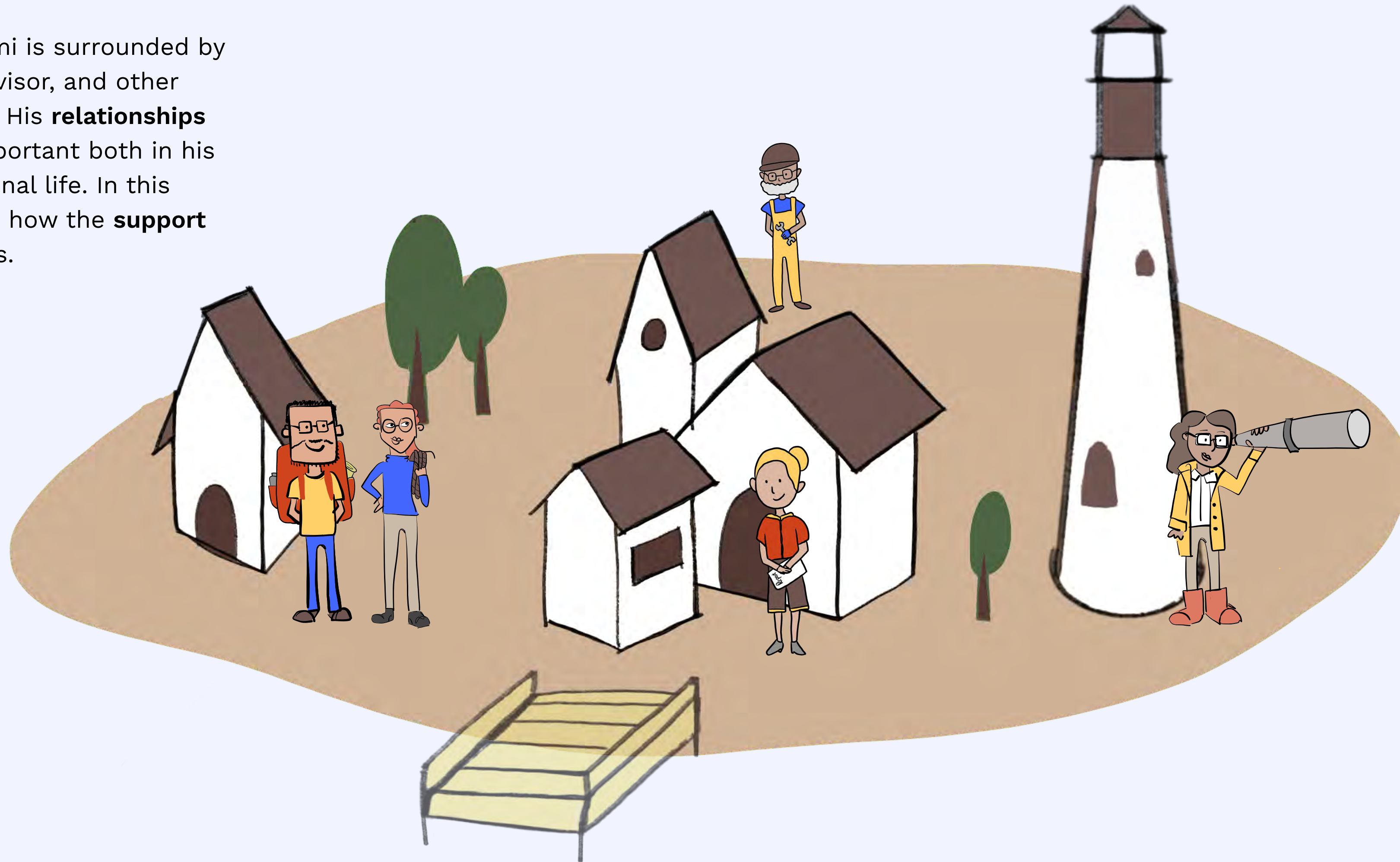
‘I accept my responsibilities as a PhD to a certain step. I like working with other people to **solve things together** and it's mainly because I like to fully get involved in the things I'm doing.’



02

Life on the island

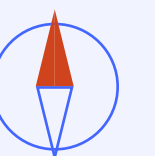
On the PhD island, Kami is surrounded by his fellow PhDs, supervisor, and other supporting colleagues. His **relationships** with them are very important both in his professional and personal life. In this section we will explain how the **support network** of PhDs works.



“No man is an island”, and neither are PhDs

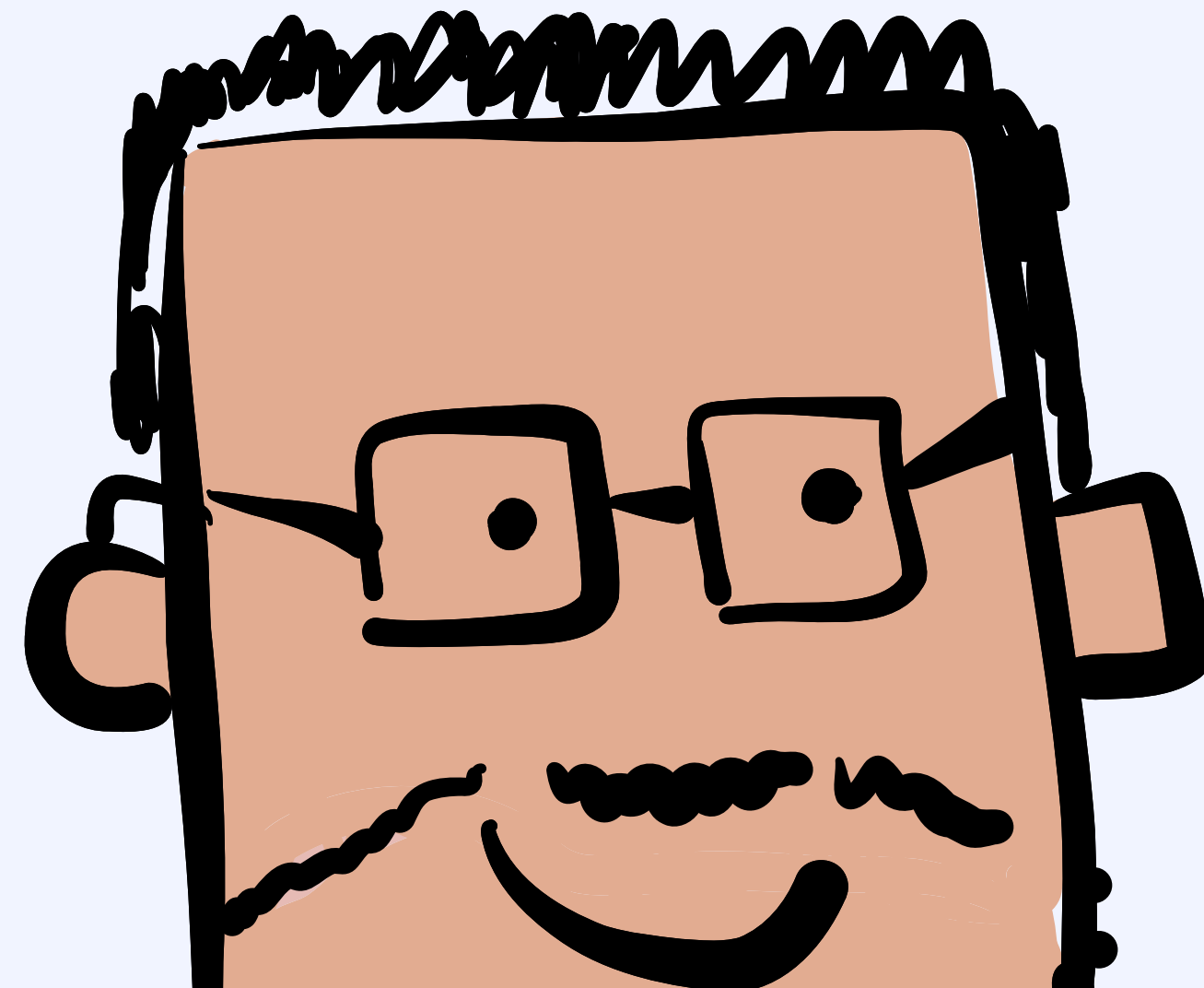
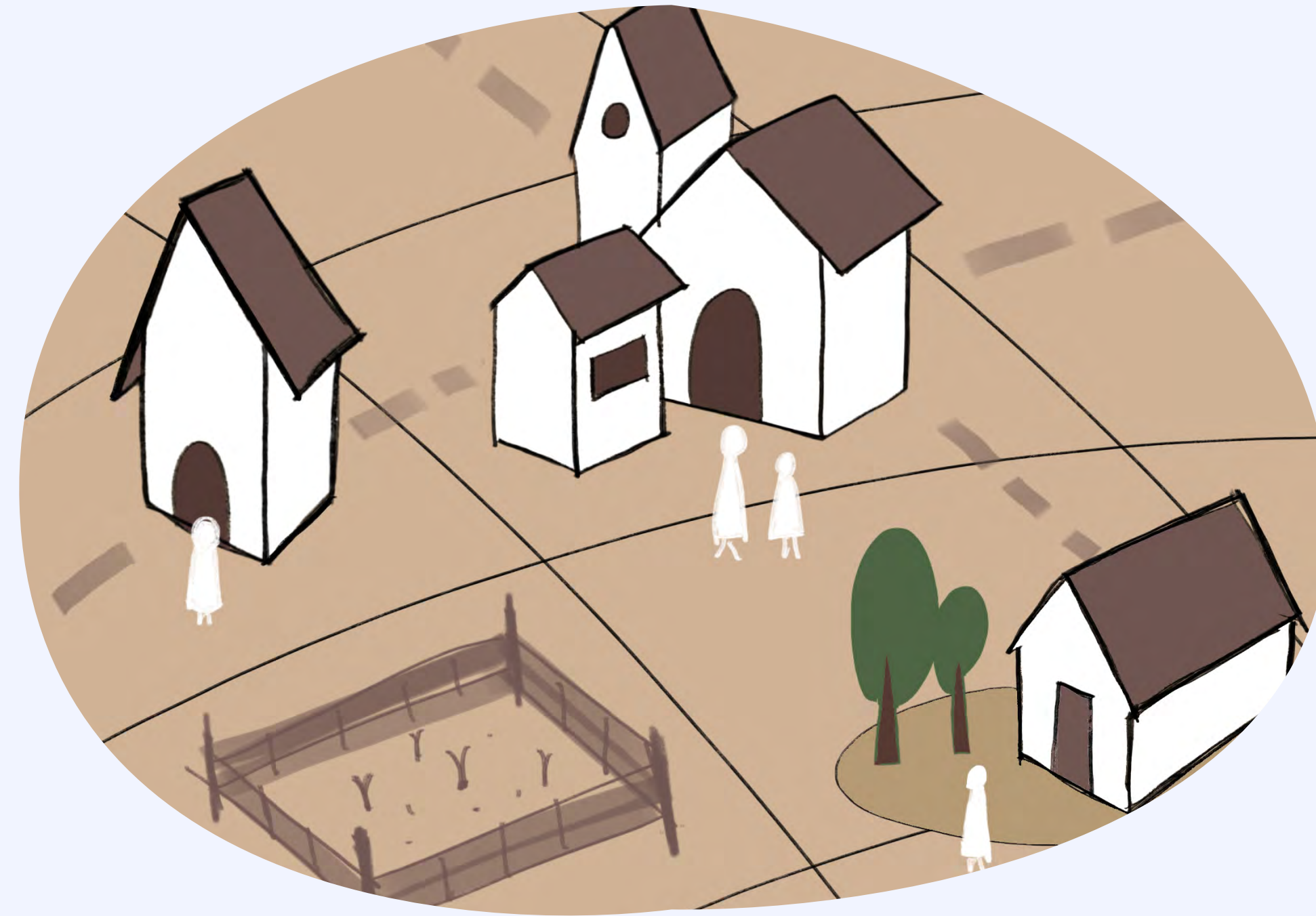
Although PhDs arrive to the island alone, there they find a whole community of people, who already know the unspoken rules of the island. Often, more experienced PhDs will **show the ropes to the new ones**, introducing them to how things work in their department and to the other people working in it. This process of **building their own network** is central to the survival of the PhD, since these relationships later translate into **access to different resources** (advice, information, help with practical matters, etc).

‘I’m actually the one who other people are asking questions to, because I started my PhD a couple of months sooner than the rest of the people.’

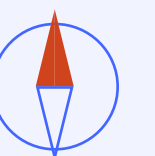


PhDs are very compartmentalized and perceive the island as different departments depending on their needs

Once they are more familiar with the inhabitants of the island, the PhDs start **structuring their network** of support in different layers. In order to do this, they assign each person in the department a certain role according to what they can support them with. This layered mental organization helps them **make sense of the department dynamics**. Additionally, it makes it easier and quicker to reach out to the **right people** with the **right questions**, which is very important to them.

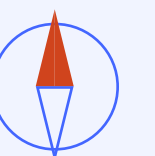


'If I have a question about writing style I usually ask the guy in my office that has a very nice writing style. If I have a question about the theory or something like that, or what exactly we need for one experiment, I'll talk to the good Masters student. If I have a question about storytelling I might ask the supervisor. If I have a question about the overall philosophy of life and existence, I will talk to my girlfriend. And so forth and so on.'



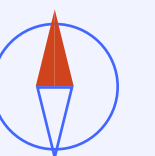
The PhD support network

Fellow PhDs are the first layer of support. They offer guidance in the beginning, and are someone to bounce ideas off of when they get stuck. They contribute to each other's wellbeing by creating a friendly atmosphere.



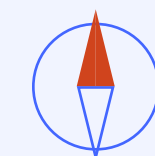
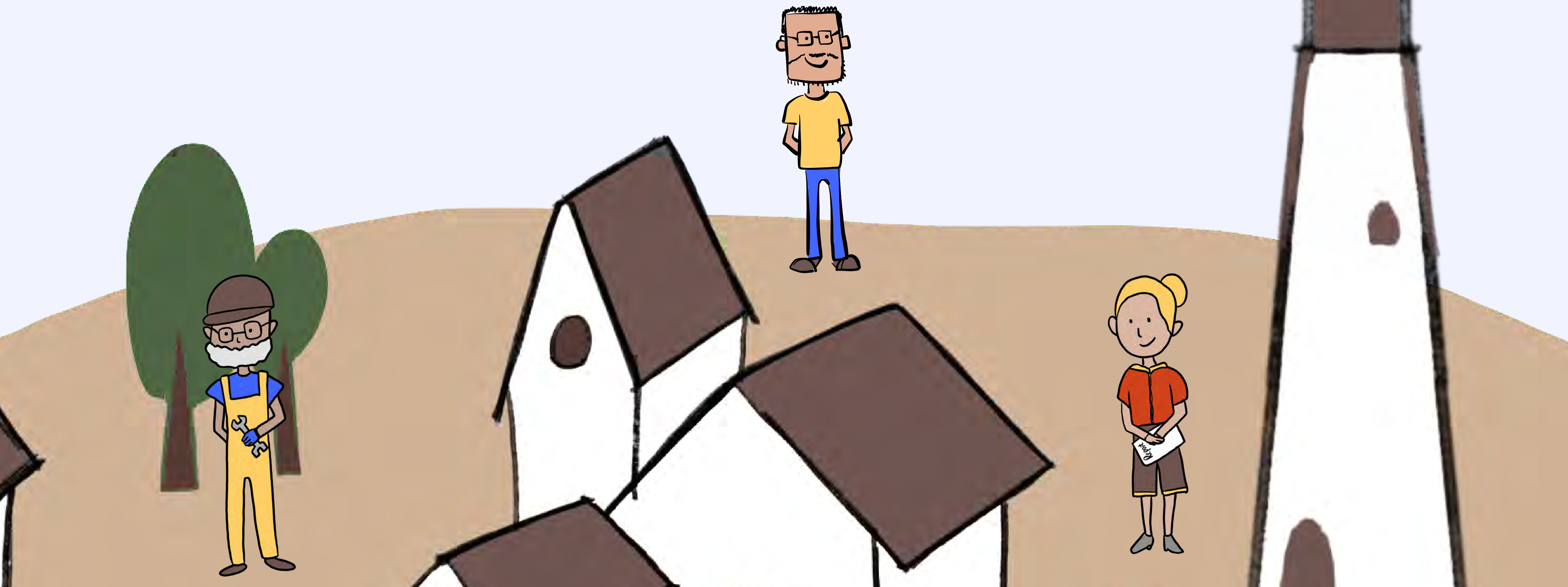
The PhD support network

Supervisors are the next layer. They have a higher overview of the research, and are highly knowledgeable. They are well-traveled and know what the world is like beyond the island; however, they can be slightly hard to reach.



The PhD support network

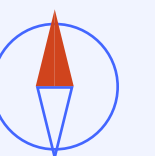
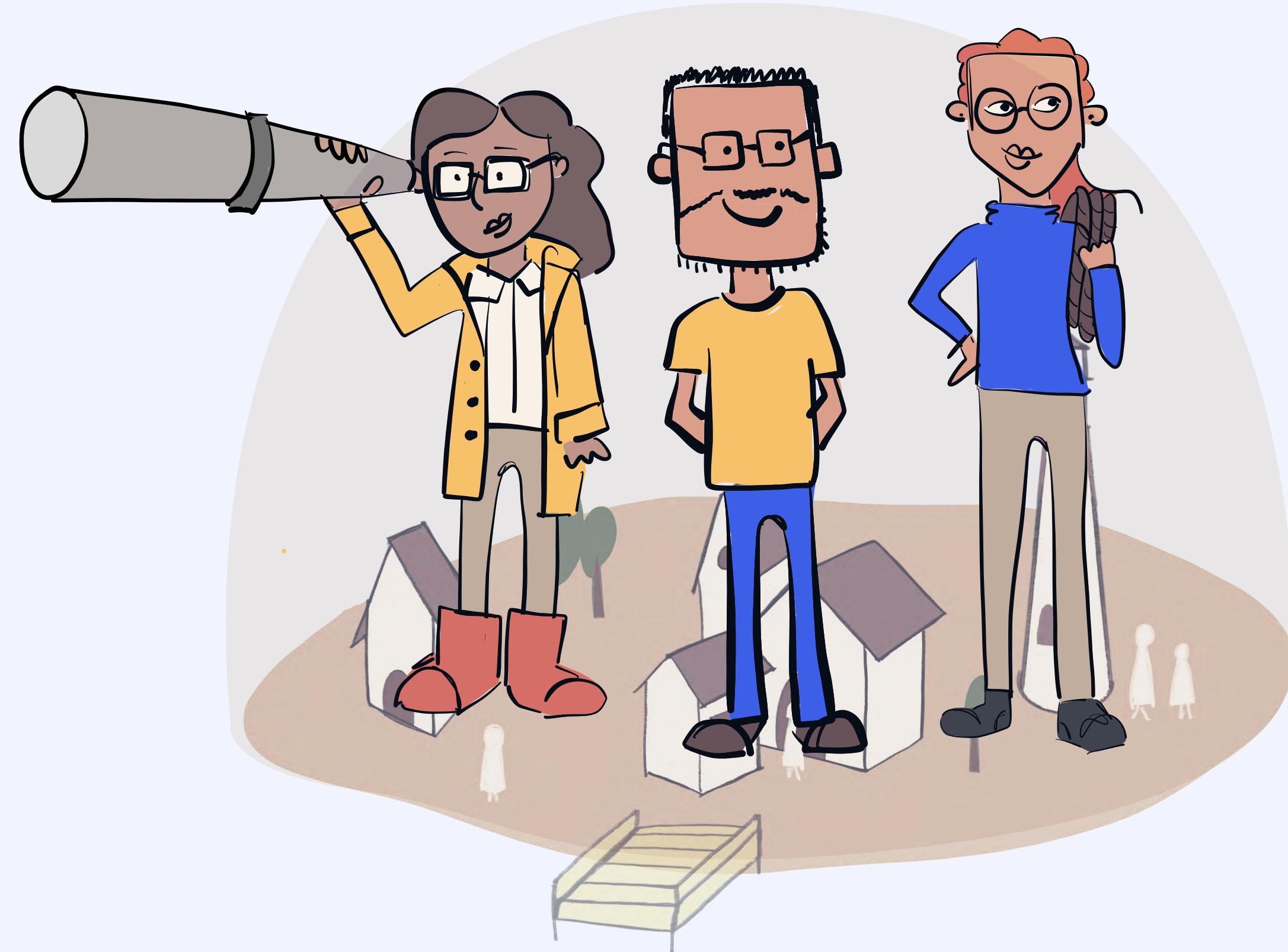
Support colleagues (secretaries, support engineers, etc) are the final layer of support within the department. Although they have very specific domains of expertise, PhDs rarely reach out to them, since they are usually not familiar with the details of their projects.



The island as a safe space

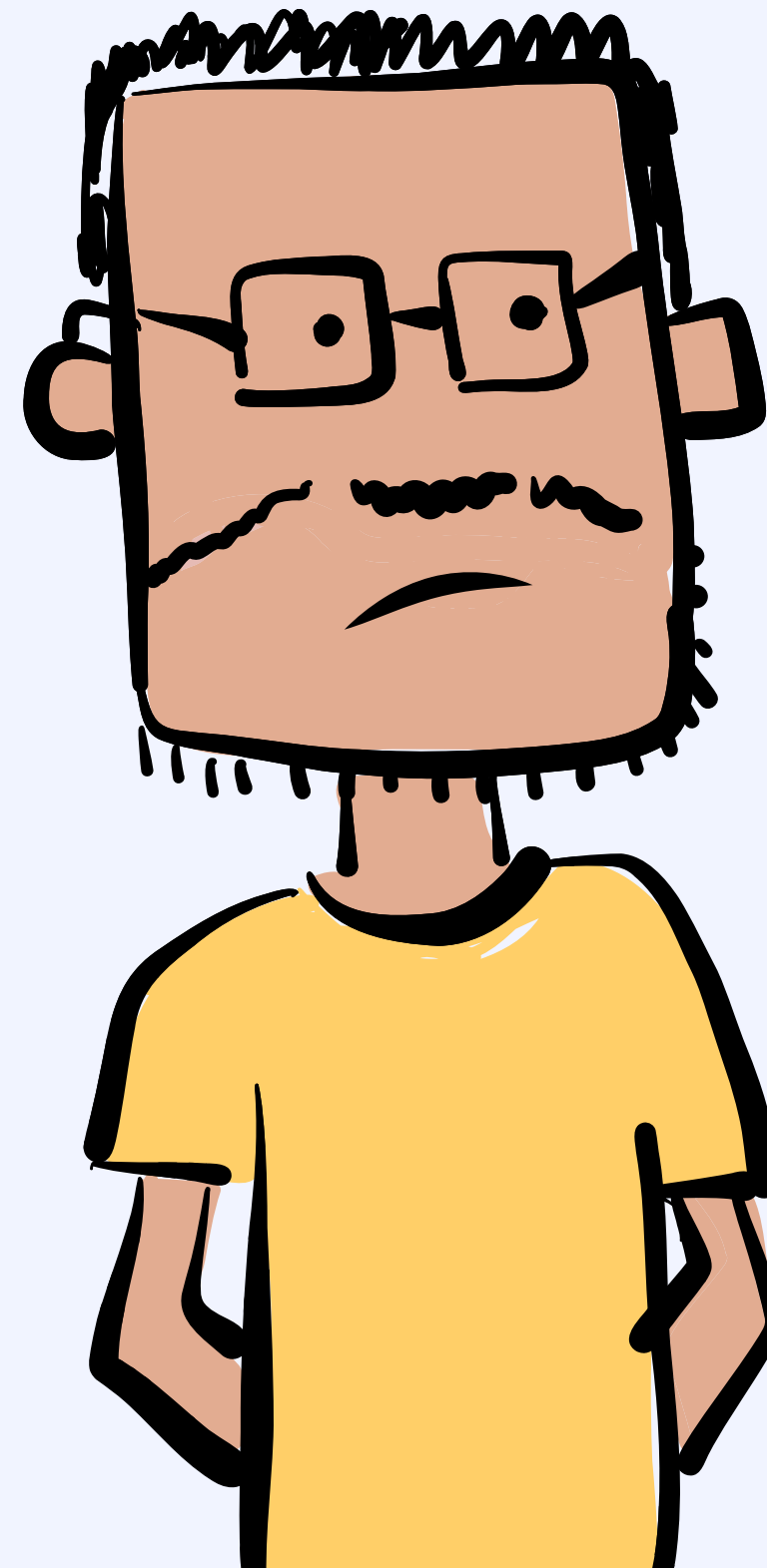
Inside their department, PhDs feel **safer to ask for support**, since they see their work as a collaboration, so everyone benefits from it. Aside from that, they primarily value the help of those colleagues that know the **specifics** of their project, since it saves them many explanations.

‘[I am less stubborn in my work life] Because here **it's a collaboration**. I'm not trying to do things alone and my work is not relevant only to me, it's a team thing, so it's to everyone's benefit, including myself to share that problem.’

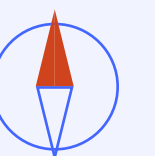


Cultural differences play a big role in the process of reaching out

An important thing to remember is that both the PhDs and the other islanders are originally from **all different corners of the world**. The island has a quite low-hierarchy culture. However, this is not what all the PhDs are used to. Many come from places where social relationships in the workplace (and in general) have a **higher level of hierarchy**. In this case, the self-applied pressure to ask the right questions and not “bother” other people gets stronger, which could prevent the islanders from asking for help.



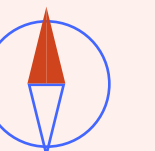
‘With my daily supervisor that’s a good relationship. But the thing is, we are culturally very different. He is very polite and politically correct and very understanding and supportive, very let’s say open and democratic in every decision-making process. But I come from a more hierarchical culture [...] Sometimes I can’t read him in the right way, so **I don’t understand what he means.**’



03

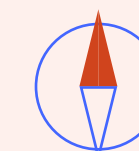
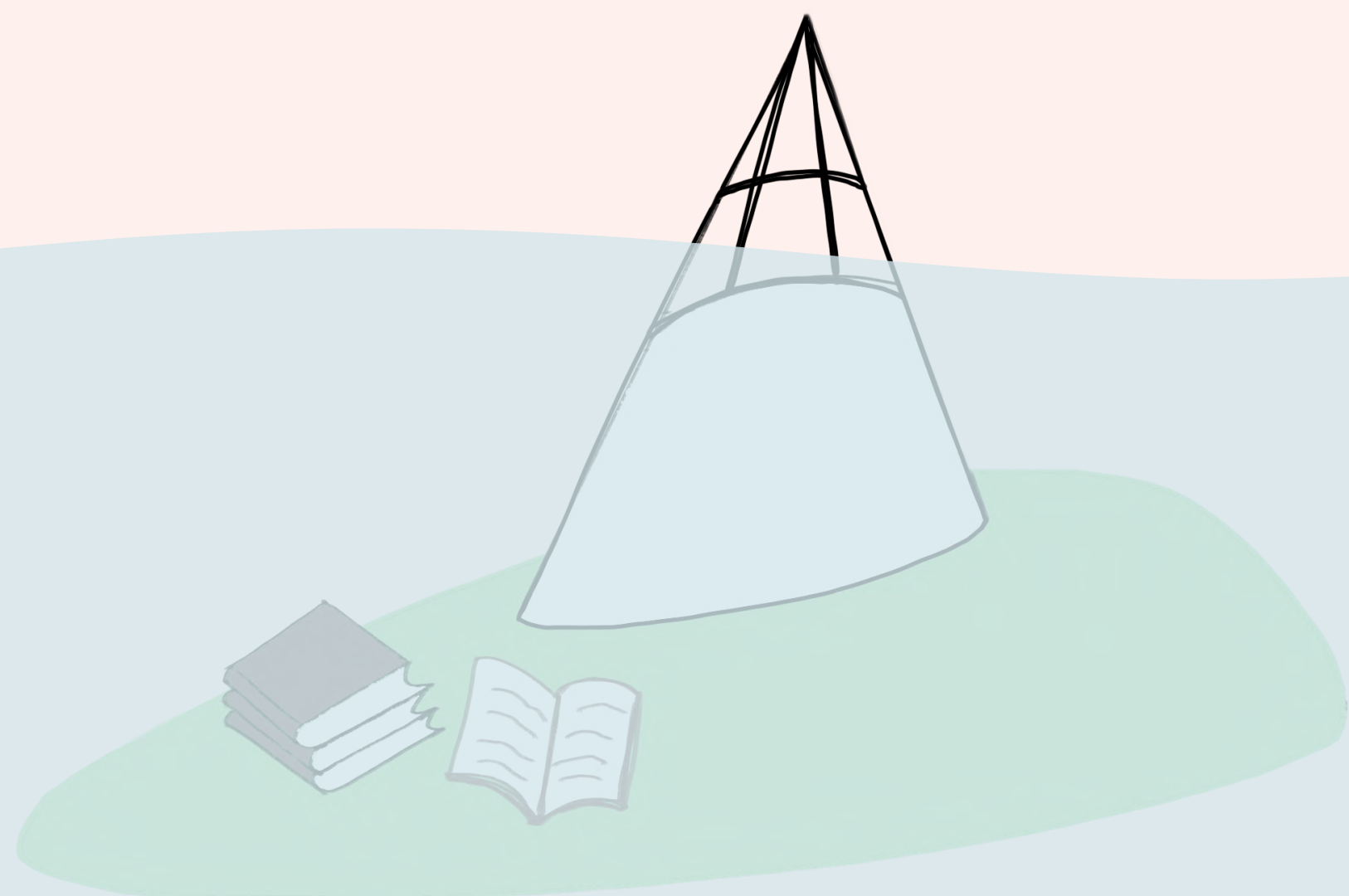
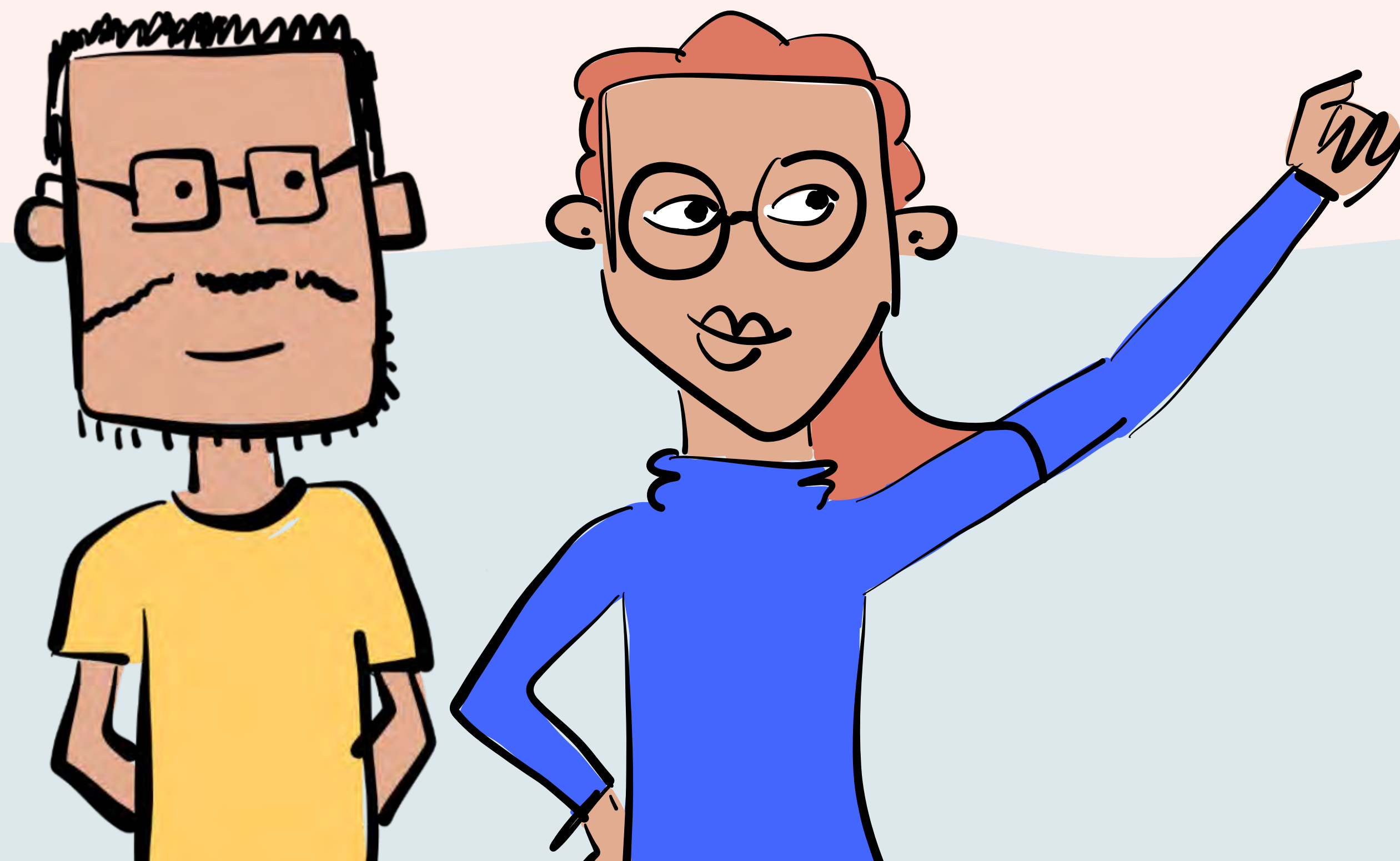
Life outside the island

The PhD island is not as isolated as it might sometimes seem. Around it, there is **a whole archipelago of knowledge** for them to discover! But for that, they have to venture out and explore.



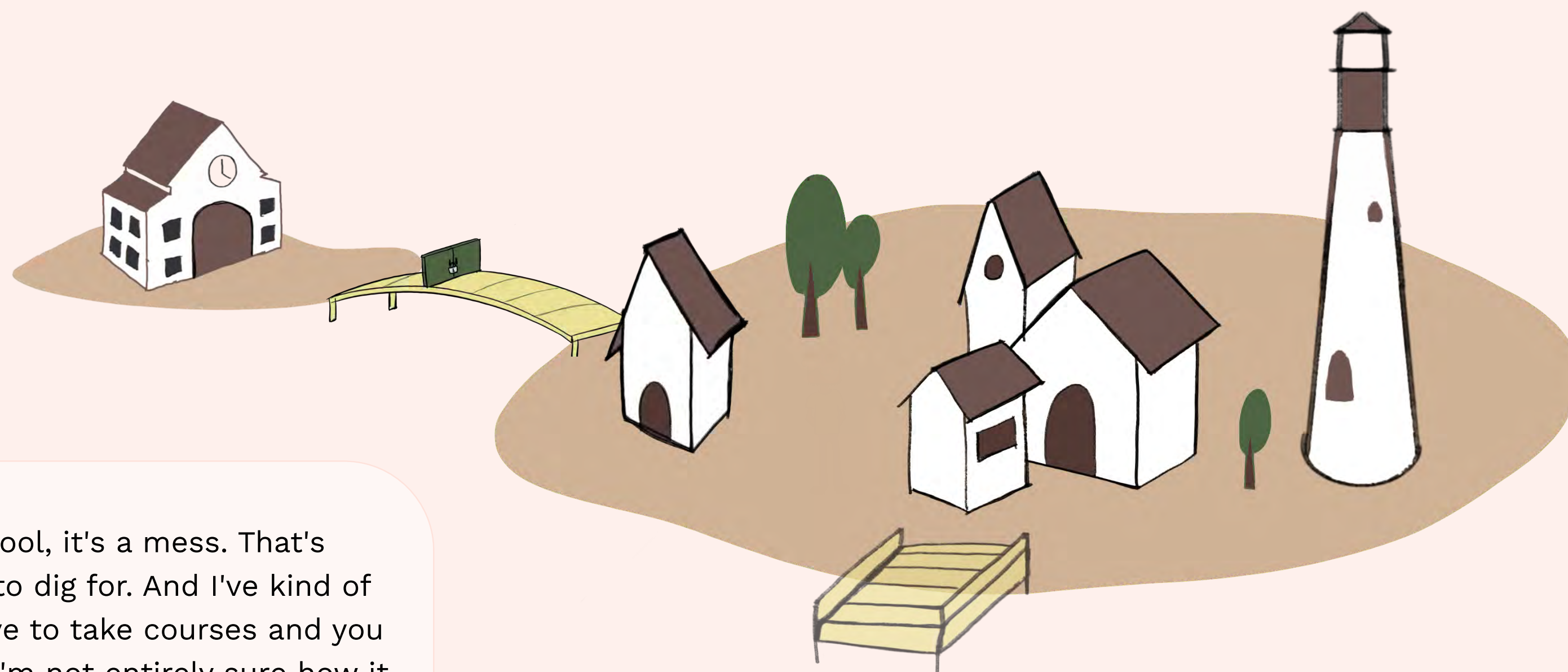
The tip of the iceberg

PhD candidates who are new to the island usually trust the guidance of their fellow PhDs. This means that their **perception** of the world beyond their department is **highly influenced by how much the people around them know** about it. This level of awareness can be quite low, especially when it comes to Library services. This is true even in the best case scenario, which is that the fellow PhDs did their Bachelors or Masters at TU Delft and are familiar with the Library.

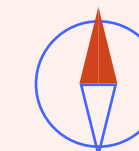


The Graduate School

The Graduate School is well connected to the PhD island. The gate to the bridge opens at a specific stage in the PhD journey. Information is presented in an unclear way in the website, which makes PhDs avoid the process, until it is completely necessary.

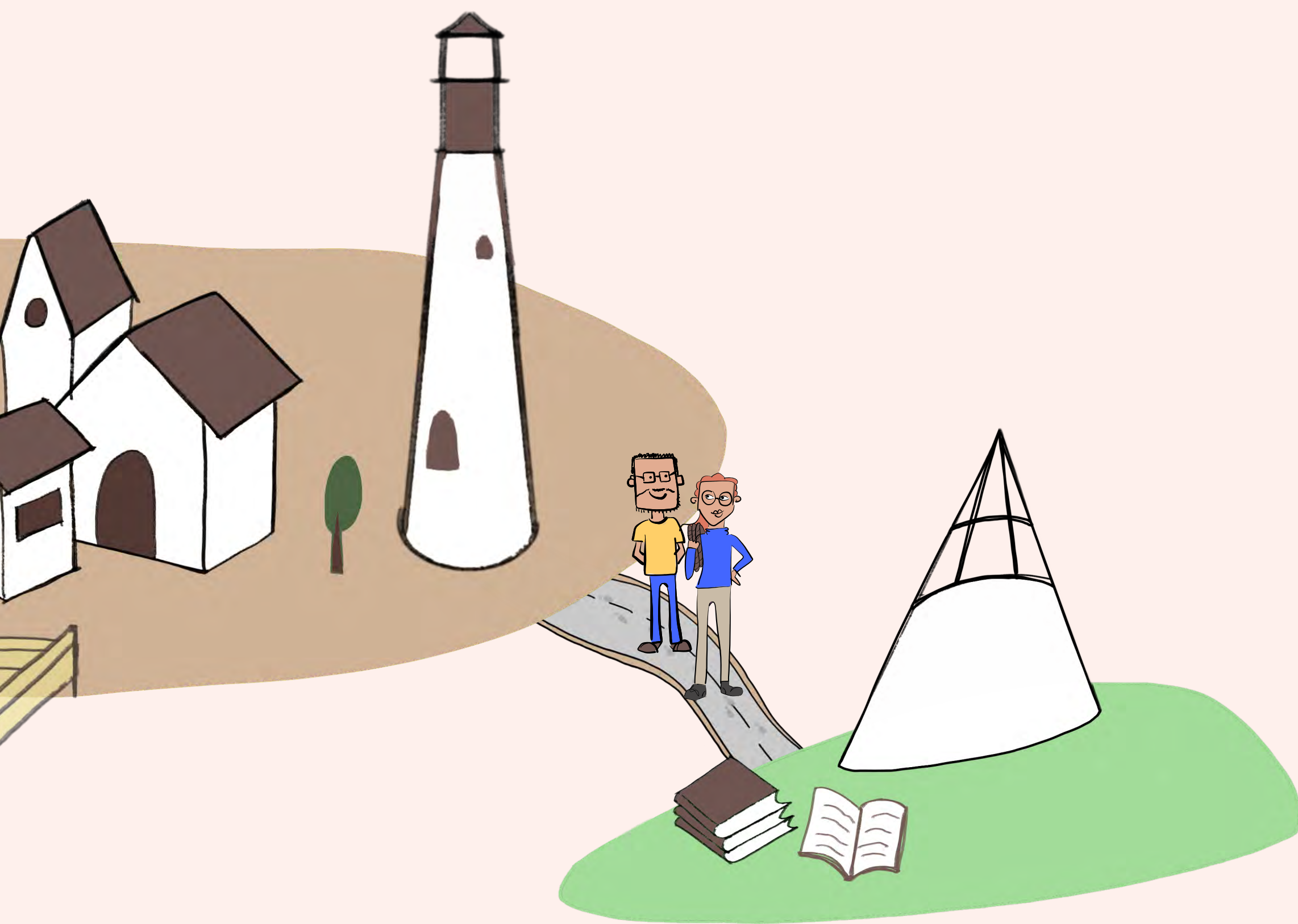


‘For example, the graduate school, it's a mess. That's something I would really have to dig for. And I've kind of avoided that until now. You have to take courses and you have to register for them. But I'm not entirely sure how it works. I haven't received any information for it. You really have to dig for it.’



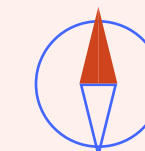
The Book Workspace

PhDs are aware of **The Book Workspace**, an emblematic island in the archipelago. The PhDs' first contact with it occurs through fellow PhDs (who are not experts) or by themselves. The book workspace is mostly used as an after-hour or weekend workspace, were you are both motivated and pushed by the atmosphere; however, the rest of the connected islands are unknown to most PhDs.



‘I think a colleague just informed me like "Hey, there is also this thing going on in the library" and that colleague did his Masters here. So I feel that **PhDs are way more disassociated with the Library** than Bachelors and Masters. So maybe he knew that because he was here for his Masters.’

‘I don't know why it's called Library. It's more like a **workspace**, more than a library. I think. You know, more books... Maybe because they are more in the digital world. Here 99% of the space is working space, which is fine, I understand that.’



“A Library does library things”

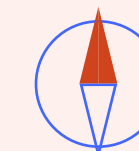
PhDs have a **preconception** on what a Library should be, based on previous experiences. This means they assume TU Delft Library to offer traditional library things and expect it to be better at providing this service.

PhDs perceive TU Delft Library as an Academic Library which narrows down the perception or specifies the services it should provide.



‘When I was 12 or something, I would go to the library in my hometown and it was kind of a hassle to go there, with that previous experience in mind, I probably have a **prejudice** over whatever they're offering right now without actually having tried to see if what they're offering is up to modern standards of service. So that, that might be a **mental barrier**.’

‘Maybe the libraries I have in mind are more like **old school**, maybe but I'm thinking of you know, corridors and shelves.’



The Wellbeing Center

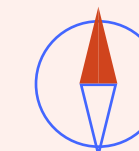
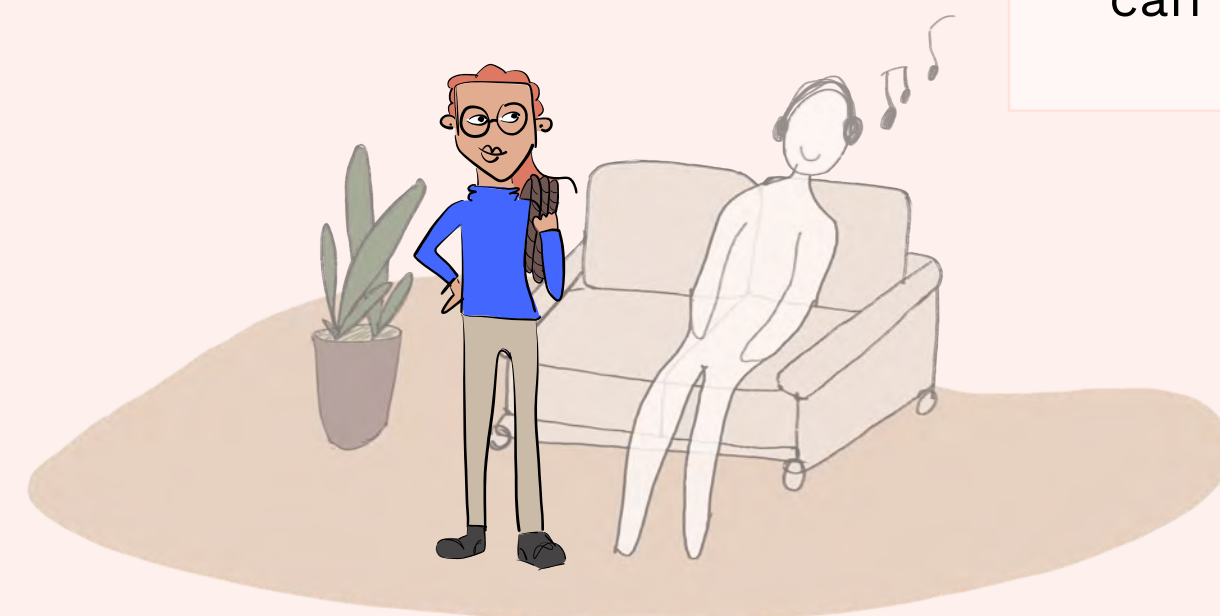
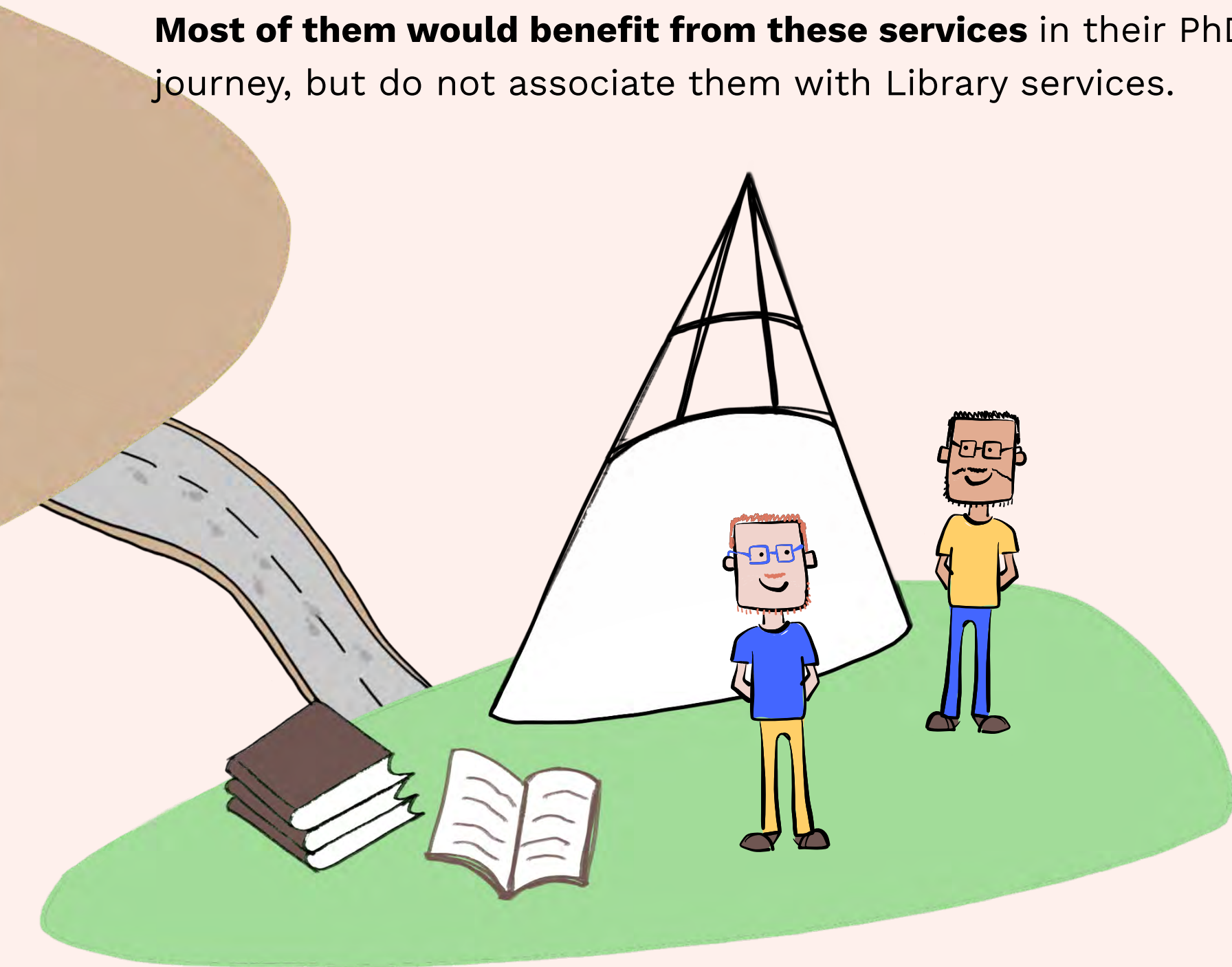
The TU Delft library offers services that contribute to the well-being of the students. Most of the services are not known to PhD candidates, with the exception of the massage chairs, known to a few. Psychological support is presented to some PhDs through their department, but as a separate service.

PhDs are very rational and their resistance to failure makes them reluctant to contact support services when faced with challenges.

Most of them would benefit from these services in their PhD journey, but do not associate them with Library services.

'I remember the first year we got a psychology doctor from the university, but I have never met him or her. I think this person would be a good help for me if I met her in difficulty.'

'I feel quite alone. There is nobody else around me who can actually help me. Of course, they can give hope and they encourage me, but nothing really that they can help me.'

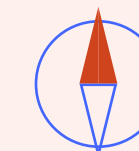
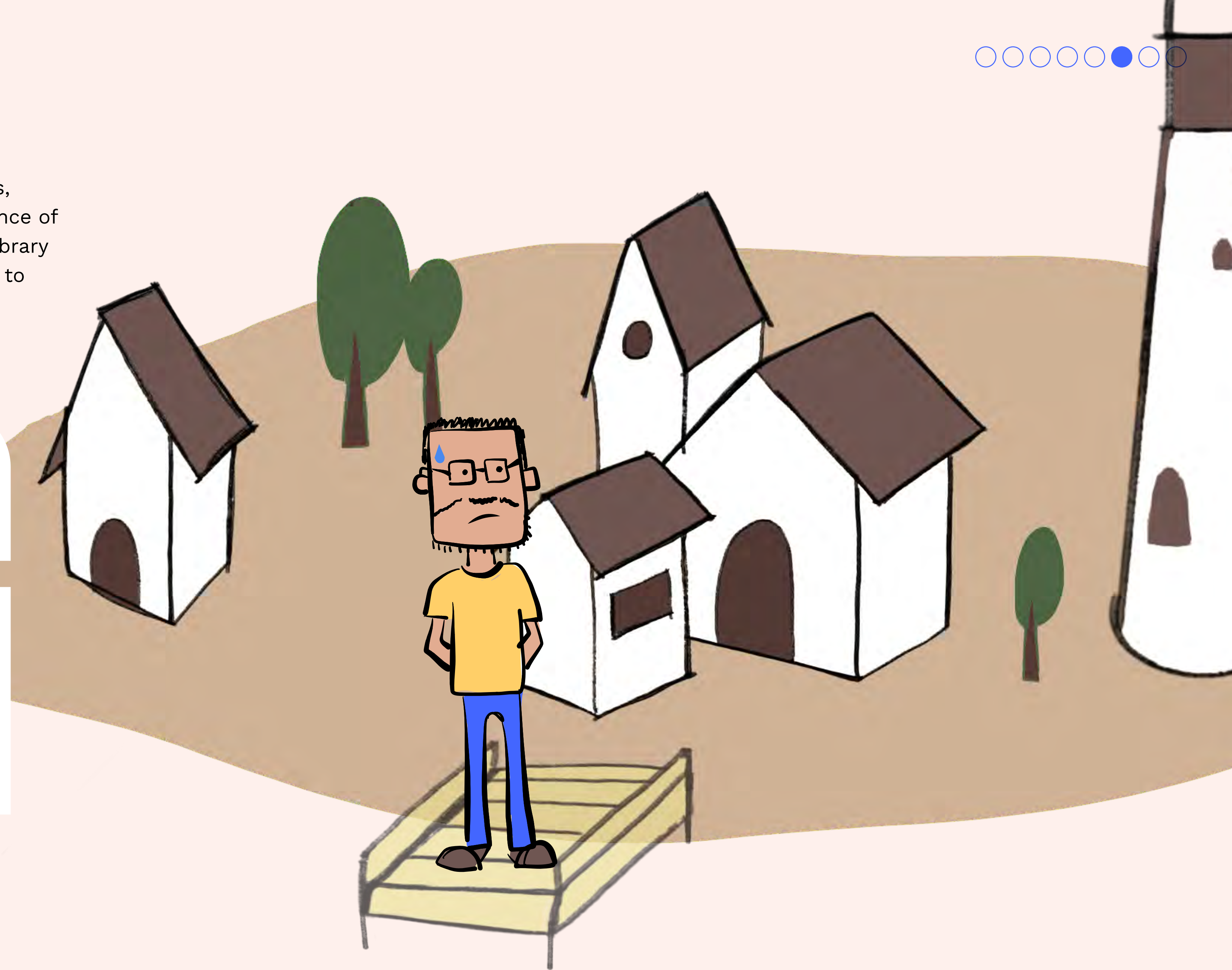


Fear of the unknown

Although they are surrounded by potentially interesting islands, PhDs are **not adventurous by nature**. They prefer the convenience of digital platforms than investing time in facing the unknown (Library Services). If a platform does not show a clear overview or how to interact, they probably will not spend time figuring it out.

‘There's the TU Delft intranet [...] It's the go-to, if you're looking for something. It's the go-to page portal to go, which I think is nice, this makes it a bit more concise.’

‘Many of the platforms are just horribly designed for people to understand what's going on, and most of the time **you give up** because you don't get exactly what you're supposed to do, it is explaining you the overall journey, but it's not like precise steps, there is **no precise description** of what you're going to do.’

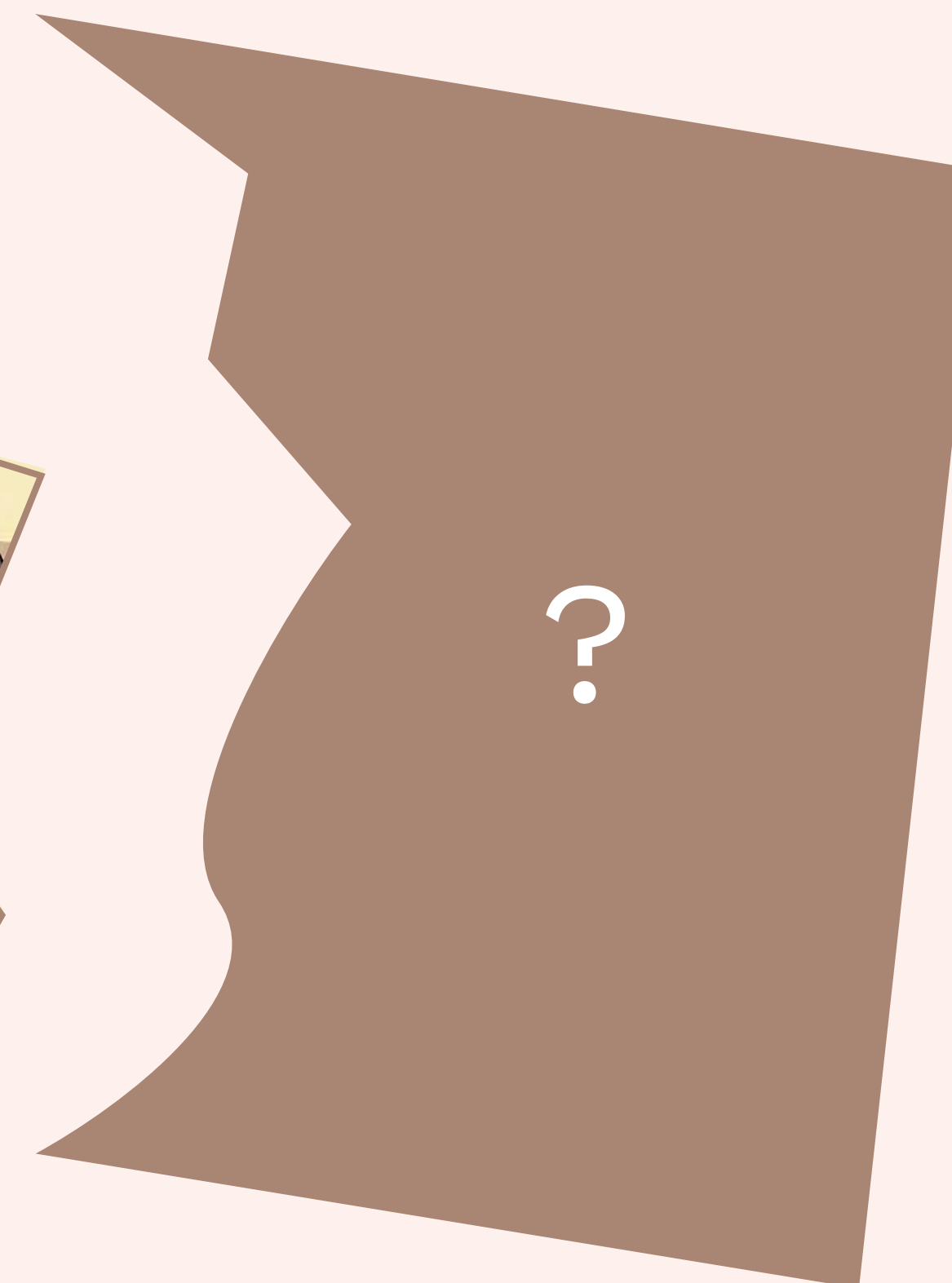


In search of the missing map

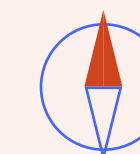
Library Website

Actors from the PhD network will refer PhDs to the TU Delft Library website. PhDs' first impression of the website is that is **not clear or straightforward to use**. After this first interaction they are likely to decide not to use it again.

The website of the TU Delft Library should be the map that PhDs use in order to **get to know what is out there** for them. However, it is not that yet.

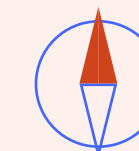
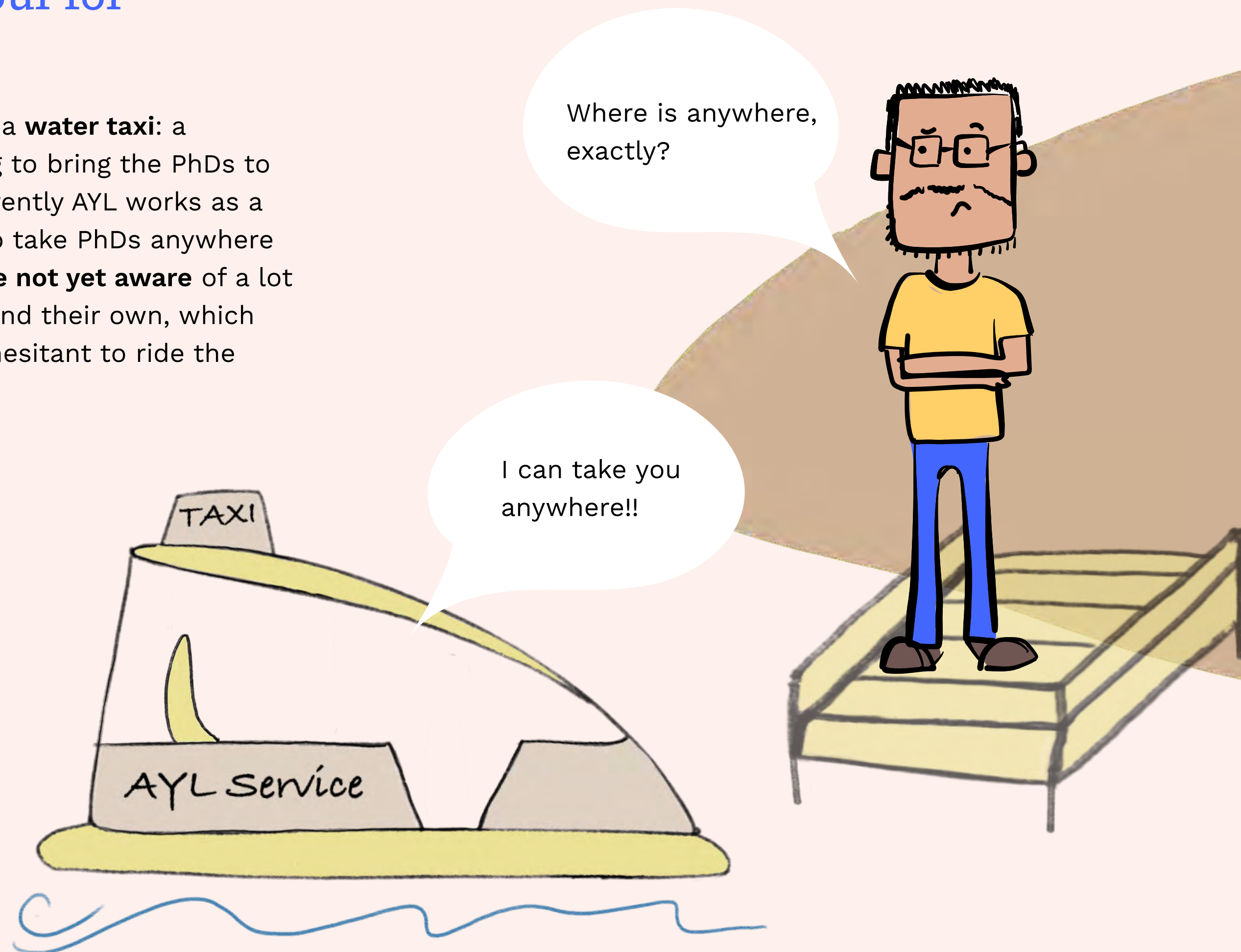


'I've checked on the website so I'm not sure if I missed the information on the web page or not, but I'm pretty sure I go for the website and I just look for the reference manager, services from the TU Delft but I couldn't find that.'



Becoming a harbour for knowledge

Ask Your Library wants to be a **water taxi**: a transportation system aiming to bring the PhDs to any of the other islands. Currently AYL works as a navigation system, offering to take PhDs anywhere they want. However, PhDs **are not yet aware** of a lot of the islands that exist beyond their own, which would probably make them hesitant to ride the water taxi at all.



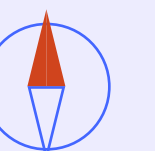
04

A better life on the island

For Ask Your Library and TU Delft Library to become known to the PhDs in the academic island and to be perceived as a harbour of knowledge, **an expert sailor** is needed. His role is to **invite PhDs to explore** beyond their island. In order to gain their trust, the sailor needs to have certain traits, which we will explain below.



- The expert sailor is **not necessarily a person**. The characteristics we propose could also apply to a system / service, or even to the Library as an organization.



Showing an overview

The expert sailor does not beat around the bush, he is **direct, clear and structured in his communication.**

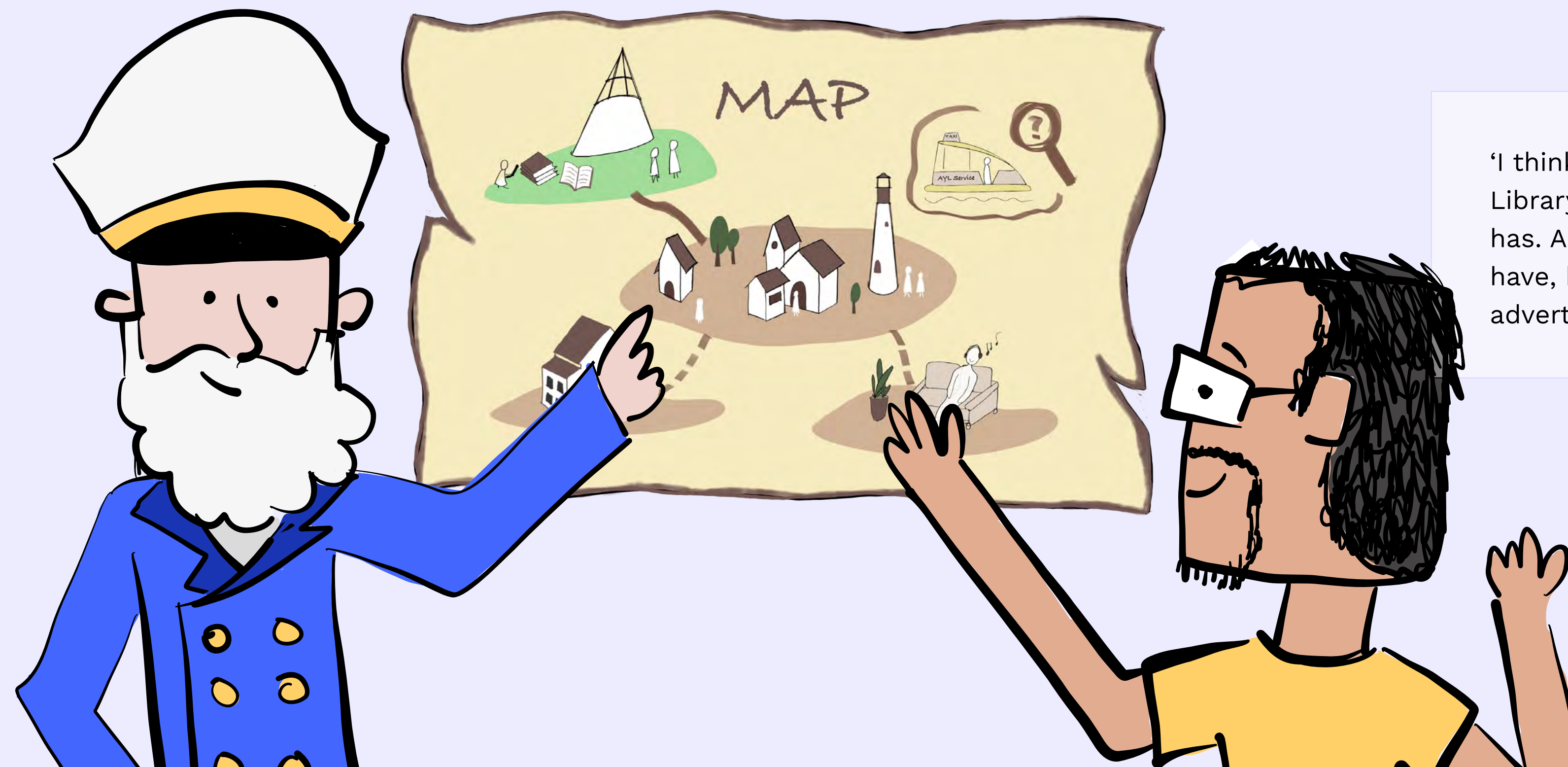
For PhDs to venture outside the island, the expert sailor needs to provide an overview of the services offered at TU Delft Library. A structured offer will help the PhD candidates find their way through the services.

DO: Website categories that are clear

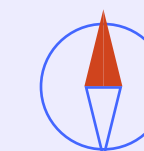
DO: Filtering the offer to PhD relevant topics

DON'T: Ask me anything!

An open ended question stresses PhDs, who do not want to ask the wrong question.



'I think the real problem is that I didn't feel I need the Library. So I didn't look into what services the Library has. And if they have something that I would like to have, but I don't know it.. So maybe more advertisements will help raise awareness.'



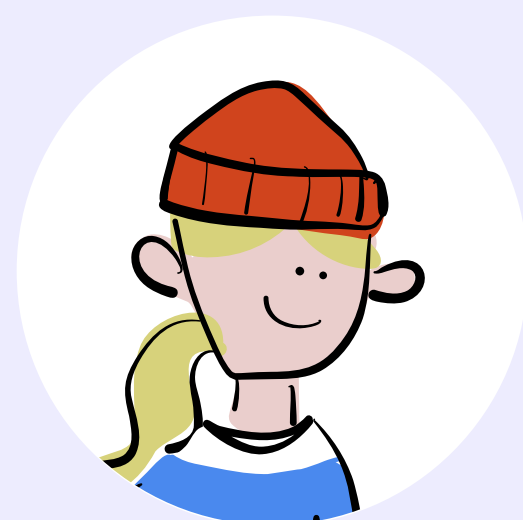
Leading the crew

The TU Delft Library crew is led by the Expert Sailor. He **shares the expertise and role of the other sailors among his crew**. When the expert sailor is not around, the sailors from his crew can be found in The Book Workspace and the TU Delft Library website.

Currently, only the Service Desk sailors are known to the PhDs. They are perceived as friendly, supportive and efficient. However, in the eyes of the PhDs their 'expertise' is limited by their preconception of what a library does. Since PhDs really value expertise and experience, for the Library to become more **attractive** the **Librarians need to be introduced as experts in specific knowledge**.



EXPERT SAILOR



SERVICE DESK SAILOR



WELLBEING SAILOR



DIGITAL SUPPORT SAILOR (AYL)

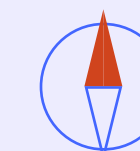
DO: Clear roles and areas of expertise

DON'T: No hierarchy, crew members that are experts on 'everything'

'Now it's very friendly people. It feels like they're also students, so it's just easy to laugh with them.'

'One time I sent them through email and another time I went to the library directly and asked them. I'm quite satisfied, actually. They helped a lot, and was a very instant response from them.'

'It's always a nice experience, they always have the answer and even if they don't have their answer they will give you an alternative to that, so I found that's really helpful. I contact them for help when I'm in the library. So it's always looking for a person.'

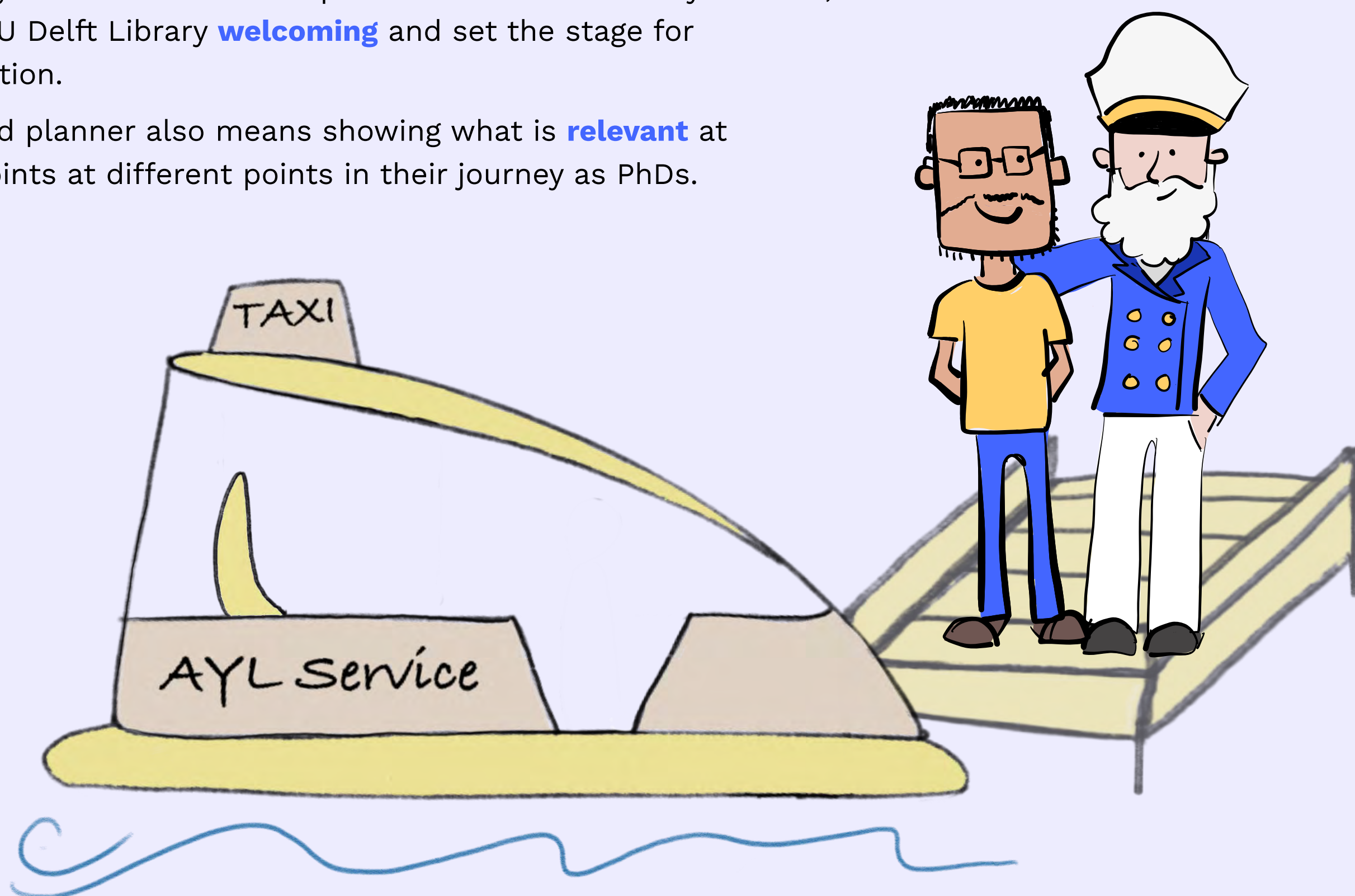


Punctual and a good planner

The expert sailor is well aware that Kami and other PhDs can arrive to the island at different times of the year. Therefore he makes sure he visits the Academic island in person or digitally several times to **introduce himself, his crew and the services offered**. As of right now, PhDs do not know yet what the Library could offer them.

Besides an introduction, making clear how PhDs can reach the TU Delft Library and the direct touchpoints such as the Library website, will make TU Delft Library **welcoming** and set the stage for communication.

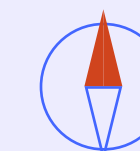
Being a good planner also means showing what is **relevant** at different points at different points in their journey as PhDs.



- DO:** An introduction of TU Delft Library and TU Delft Library services
- DO:** Specify clear touchpoints for contact along the PhD journey
- DO:** Following up on the changing needs of PhDs and guiding their transition in their TU Delft journey (from Msc to PhD).
- DON'T:** Communicate without a clear strategy and structure

‘The thing is I'm not really 100% sure what is there for now. Because one thing that I'm missing is probably during my introduction, because as a PhD **I don't know what services are offered by the Library** of TU Delft and I'm not sure if I am supposed to find it out myself, or if it's supposed to be [my department that informs me].’

‘I've reserved a room there a few times as well. But also only during my Masters. Nowadays, I don't need to do that. Everything is in the department, so **why would I?**’



Proactive and personal

The expert sailor is a personal figure along the PhD journey. Specially for well-being related aspects, PhDs value the human contact when reaching out.

A personal welcome

Personal communication from the expert sailor and the rest of the crew would make the first step for the Library and Library services to be **welcoming**.

Currently PhDs do not feel the offer reflects their desires; if the communication becomes **directed to what they find relevant**, it will be easier to **attract** their attention.

‘Advertise sending a message to everybody. You can mention it on the top that “hey, we provide a free message”, [laughs], people will get interested...’



DO: Reach out to them in person (Analog) or with personalized communication (Digital)

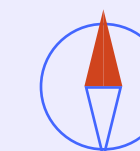
DO: Showcase the offer relevant to PhDs

DON'T: Lack of introduction to the TU Library Services

DON'T: Faceless or impersonal emails

‘Here are all the secretaries, colleagues, engineers talk about strictly professional stuff, this already kind of **puts a restriction on what kind of help I can ask**. I can't ask my secretary for psychological help for example. Apart from that, the only barrier I think there is on asking anything to anyone is how I feel towards them. I might **not think that we have that kind of connection**.’

‘A group message email may have many people giving replies that are quite good, or it may have no one replying. But if you send this directly to someone, they will definitely reply to you!’



Well-connected, well-known & recognizable

Well connected

The expert sailor is savvy navigating the seas. He is well connected with a strong network in each Academic and surrounding islands.

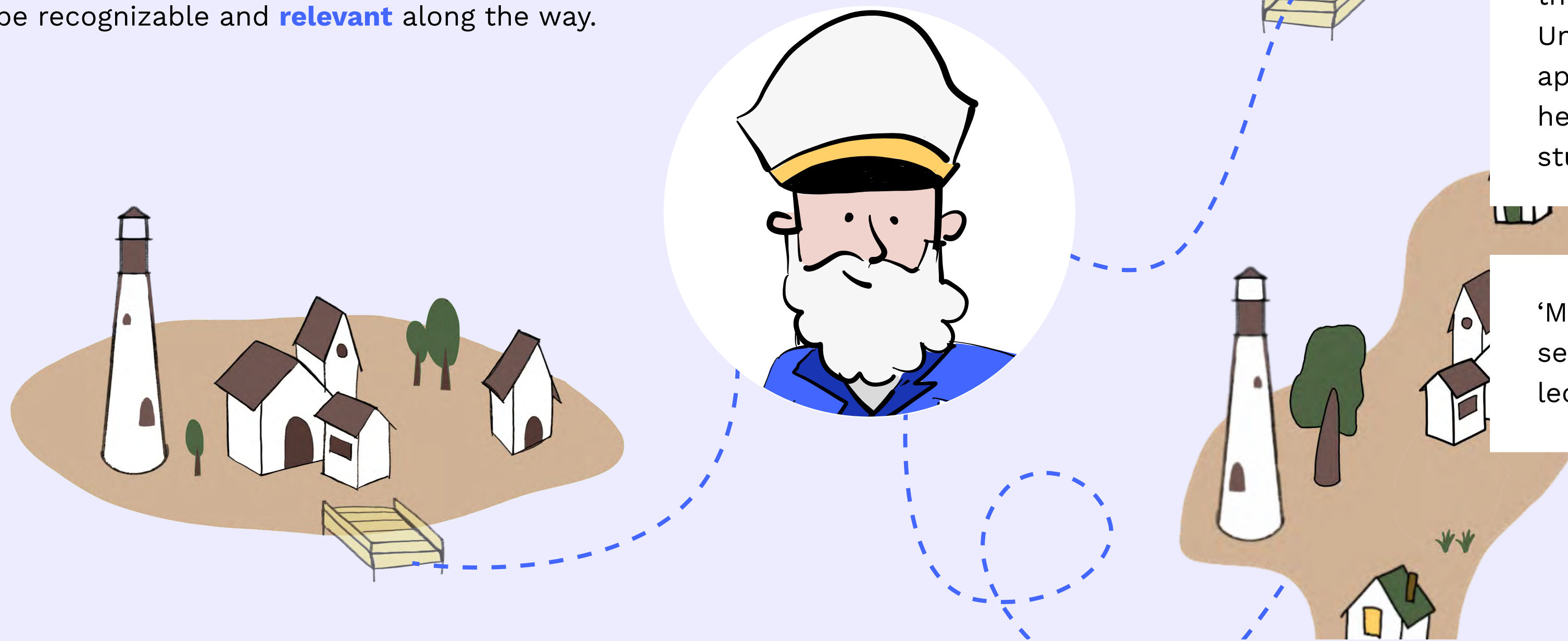
The Graduate School island and the PhD network are close to the expert sailor. They help him to **spread the word of the TU Delft Library services**, since they usually refer PhDs to the TU Library website or Library touchpoints.

Well known and recognizable

He also **makes sure to be well known in the Academic island**. Since the services the TU Delft Library provides are used at different stages of the academic journey of a PhD, he makes sure to be recognizable and **relevant** along the way.

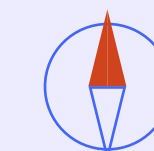
DO: Go through supervisors to reach PhD students
DO: Use the PhD network. The fellow PhDs' department community is strong and will spread the word in the island

DON'T: Being recognizable without being clear might confuse PhDs, TU Delft Library has to earn the PhDs' trust for them to use the services



'He would suggest to me that I could also see a therapist, which is specialized in counselling at the University. He sent me an email about how to make an appointment for counselling and some of this. So I think he was actually able to give some support to the students whether it was just academically or spiritually.'

'Most information spreading is through email that the secretary would maybe say, Hey, we're having a large lecture here and there!'



Available 24h

PhDs go through such a lengthy process before reaching out for help that **first impressions** take even greater importance. PhDs will judge a service after their first interaction. If they struggle finding a resource or it does not comply with their standards, it is very unlikely they will try to use it again.

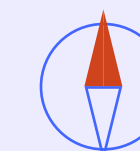
DO: Intuitive navigation and easy to find information

DO: Quick and efficient reply

DON'T: No reply, leaving message unread



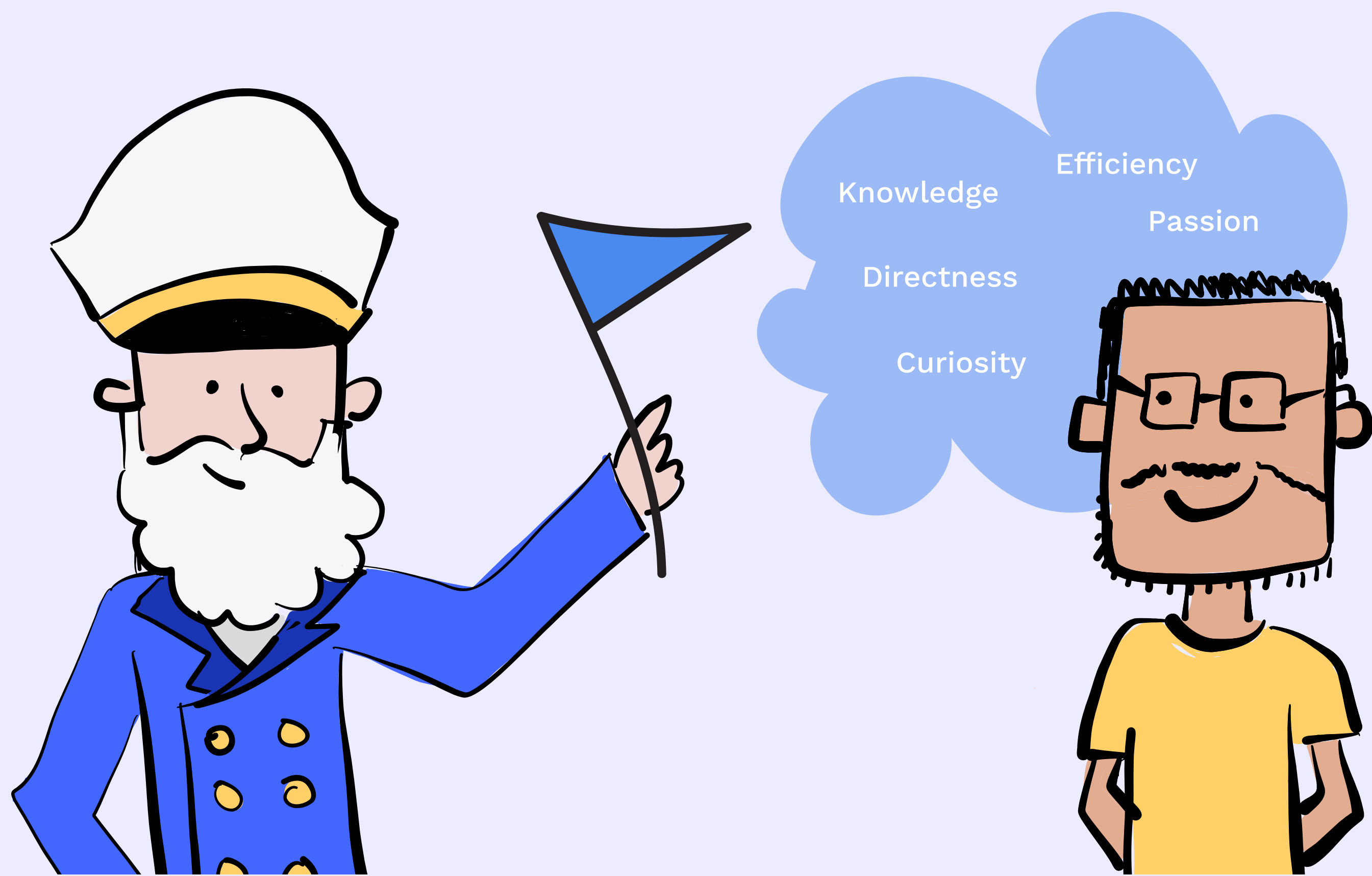
'I actually was a couple of times staring at the interface online, and it is very complicated. [...] I can tell that the service is there, but I mean **the bridge between the user and the service is not there, so you walk across the service**, but you would like to control how you use that.'



Culturally aware & sensitive

The expert sailor is an ambassador of TU Delft Library, so he must show an open, diplomatic behavior. He understands the PhD community is built of students from many different countries in the world at diverse stages of their life, even if they have some shared values. This means that **there will most likely not be a one-size-fits-all method** of preferred communication, since PhD candidates are an incredibly heterogeneous group.

DO: Be culturally sensitive, communicate mindfully
DON'T: Fall into stereotypes, believe all PhDs are the same



1. MEETING KAMI

2. LIFE ON THE ISLAND

3. LIFE OUTSIDE THE ISLAND

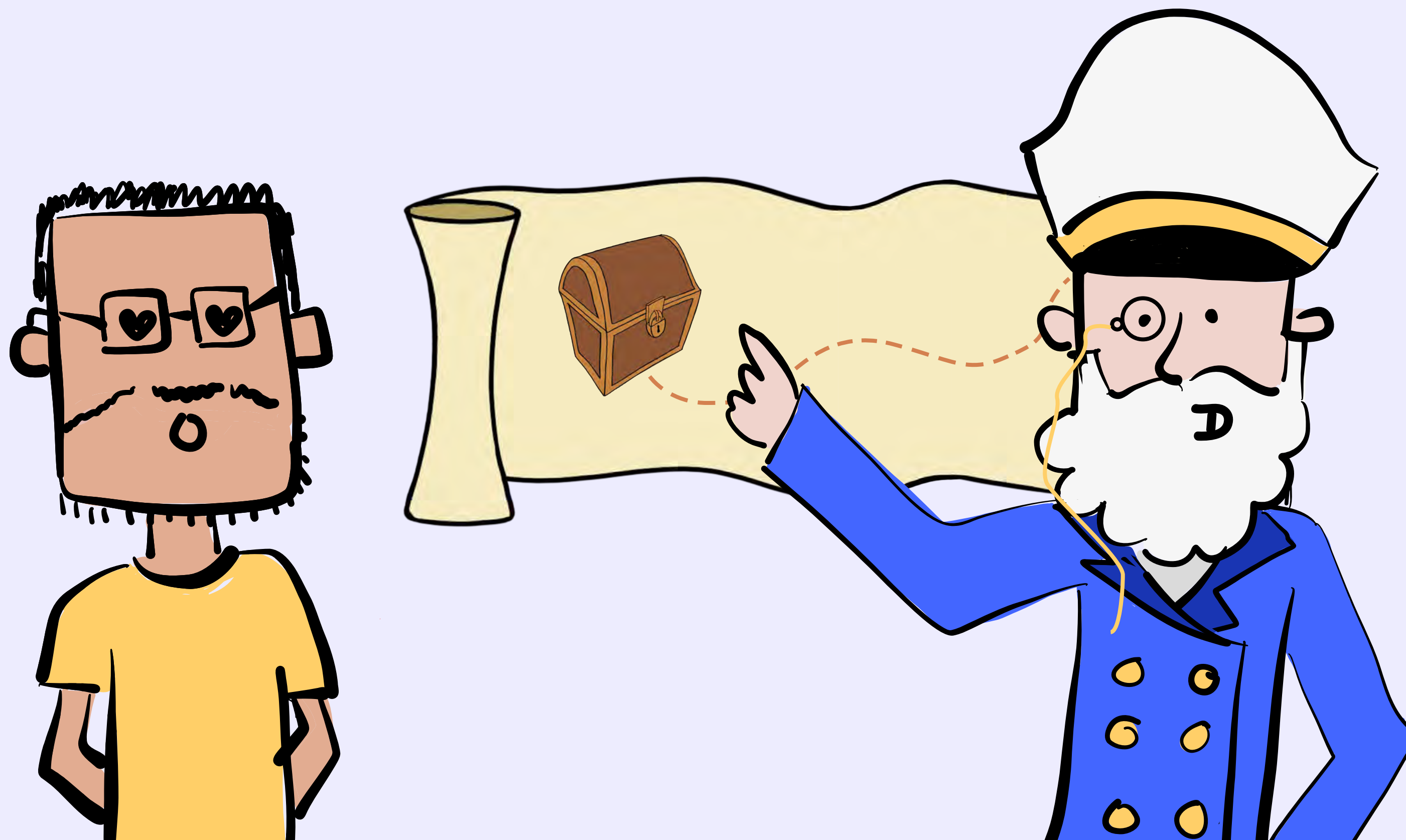
4. A BETTER LIFE ON THE ISLAND



Well-travelled and wise

The skilled sailor demonstrates that he has been sailing the seas all his life and **such expertise is reflected in his communication and knowledge** in different areas, related to TU Delft Library and the needs that a PhD may have. By showing his expertise to the PhDs he can create a connection and become a **trusted figure** to whom they can turn.

- DO:** Share the expertise of the Library
- DO:** Become part of the PhD support network
- DON'T:** Misuse their trust once they give it



1. MEETING KAMI

2. LIFE ON THE ISLAND

3. LIFE OUTSIDE THE ISLAND

4. A BETTER LIFE ON THE ISLAND



Towards a better service support system

As it is right now, AYL is too broad or too open for PhDs. They feel comfortable with structure, and look for convenience, since they are very busy and stressed.

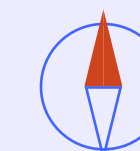
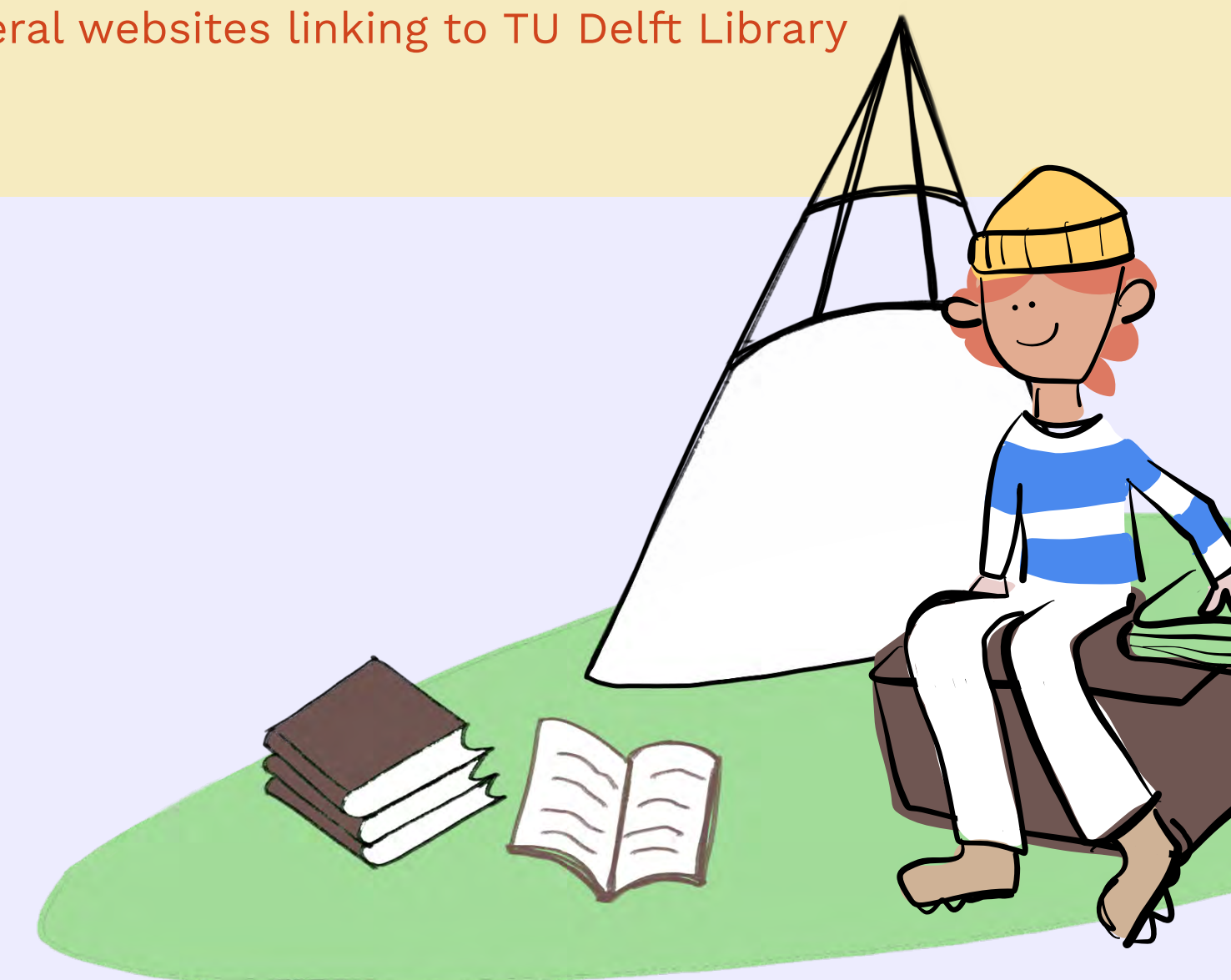
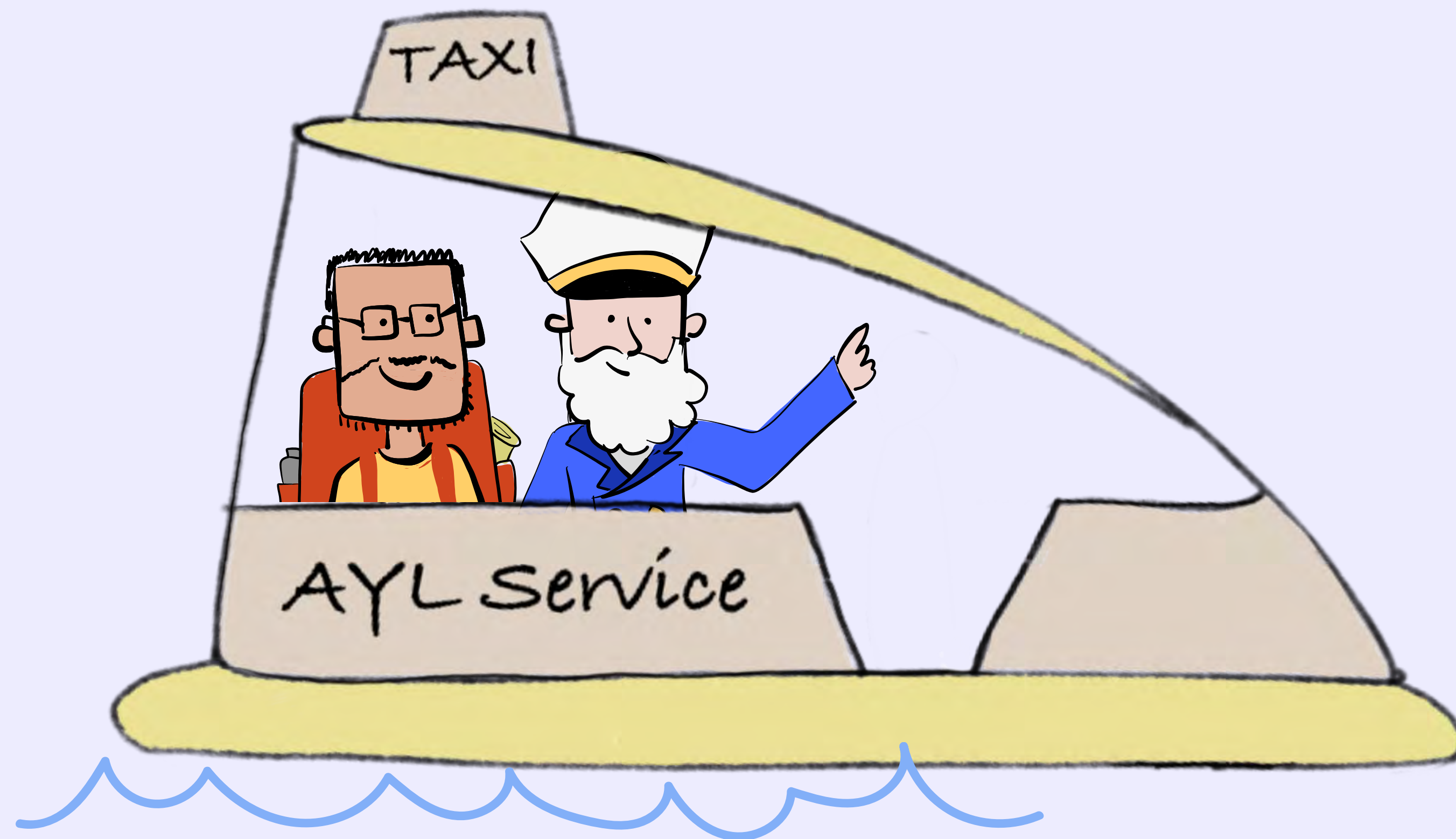
Instead of one-stop shop, show them some directions.

PhDs are afraid of asking dumb questions; giving them enough information to ask informed questions could help them reach out.

DO: A centralized, organized selection of services, while allowing PhDs to reach out in case of additional questions

DON'T: Empty navigation bar for them to fill in the required information

DON'T: Several websites linking to TU Delft Library services



In order to become the most customer-friendly library in the world...

1

Welcoming

PhDs need to get acquainted with the Library Services, in a personal and clear way.

2

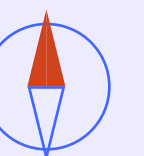
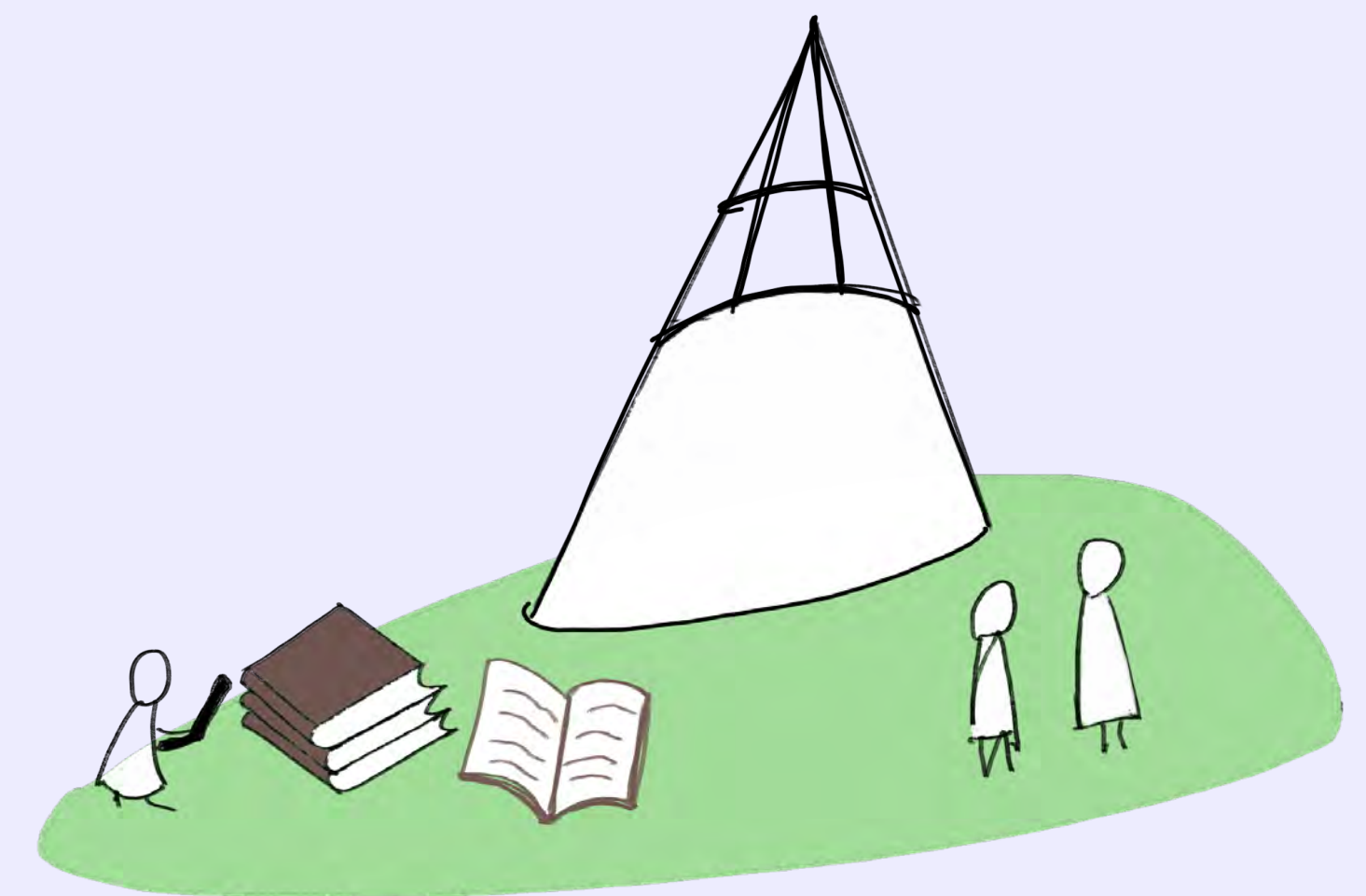
Relevant

The Library Services offer should be structured, in order for them to be able to find what they need.

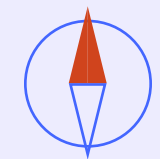
3

Attractive

The TU Library should decide: who do they want to be? And communicate that to PhDs as well.



Good luck and
safe travels!



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