

School of Law and Society, Research Day,
14th July 2021

Reflections on Metrics and Misunderstandings

Patrick Nunn

Professor of Geography SLS



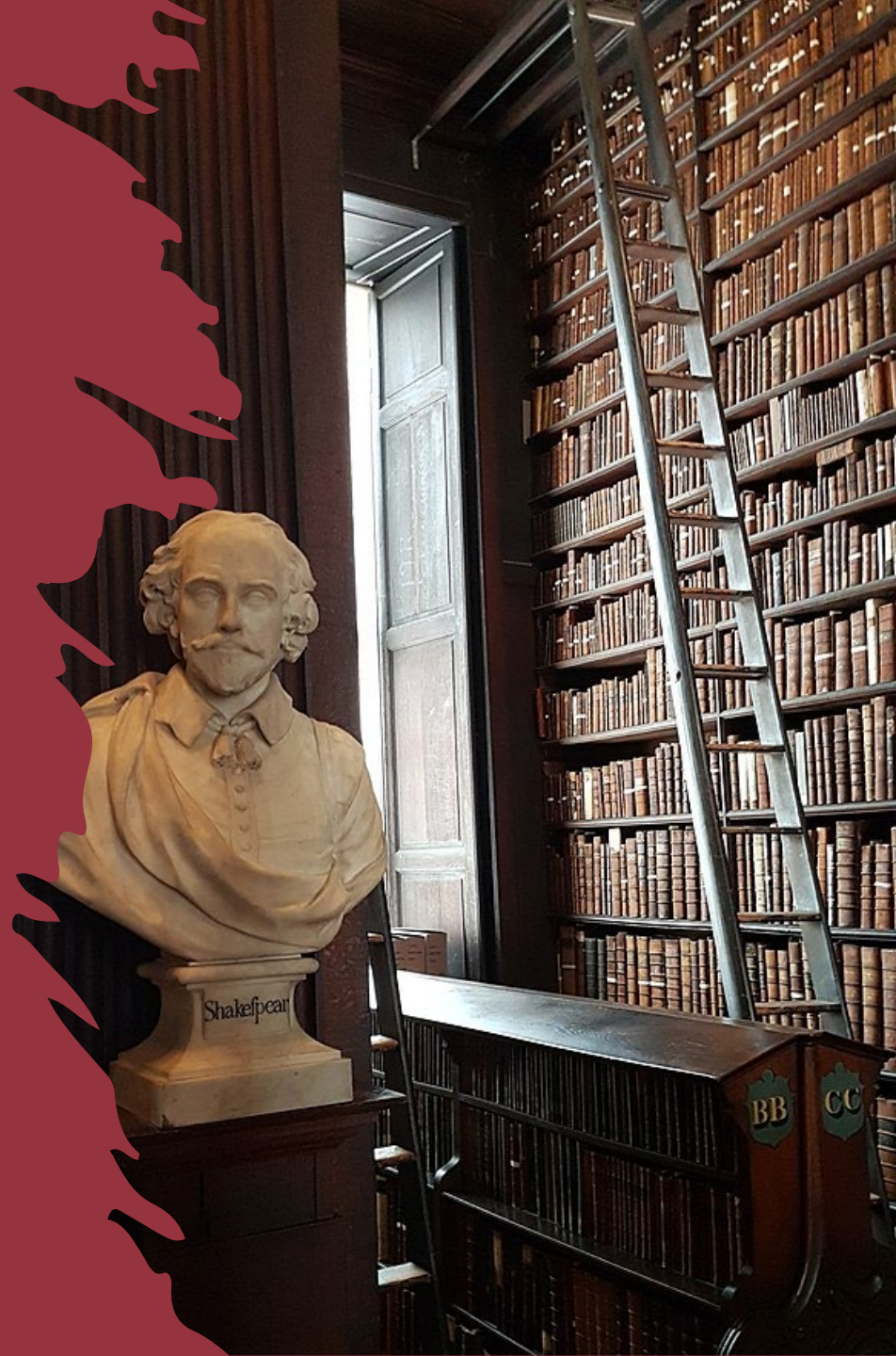
Academic anxieties

One recent survey found that 43% of academic staff exhibited symptoms of at least a mild mental disorder. This is nearly twice the prevalence of mental disorders compared with the general population. Primarily to blame are the increased workloads of academics and demands to publish and obtain external revenue.

(Dr Paul Gorczynski, 22nd February 2018, *The Conversation*).

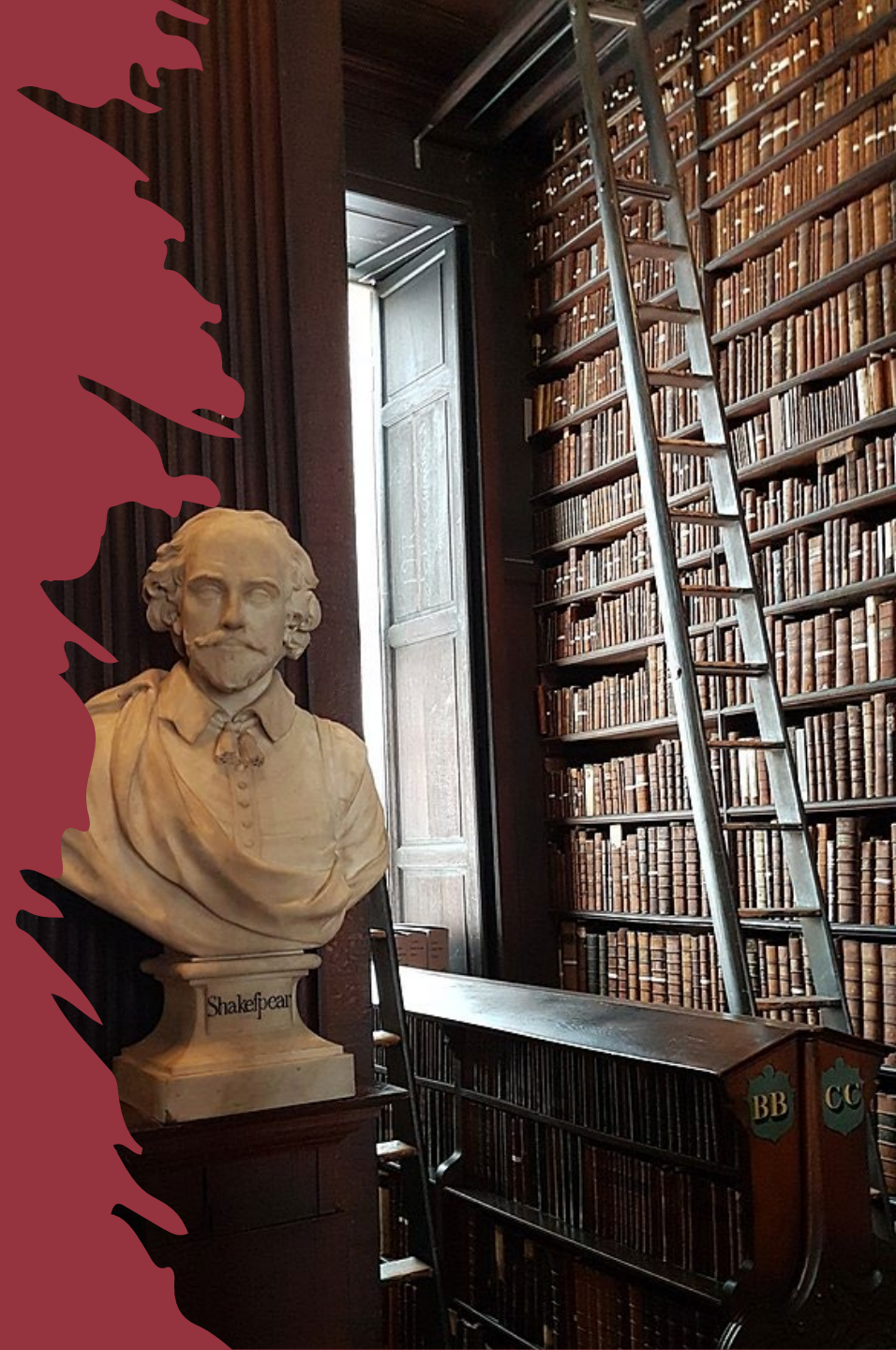
Organisation of this Talk

1. How academia has changed – and why it matters.
2. Metrics as measures of institutional not individual quality.
3. Strengthening self-belief: not-mentoring as mentoring?
4. What I find useful.



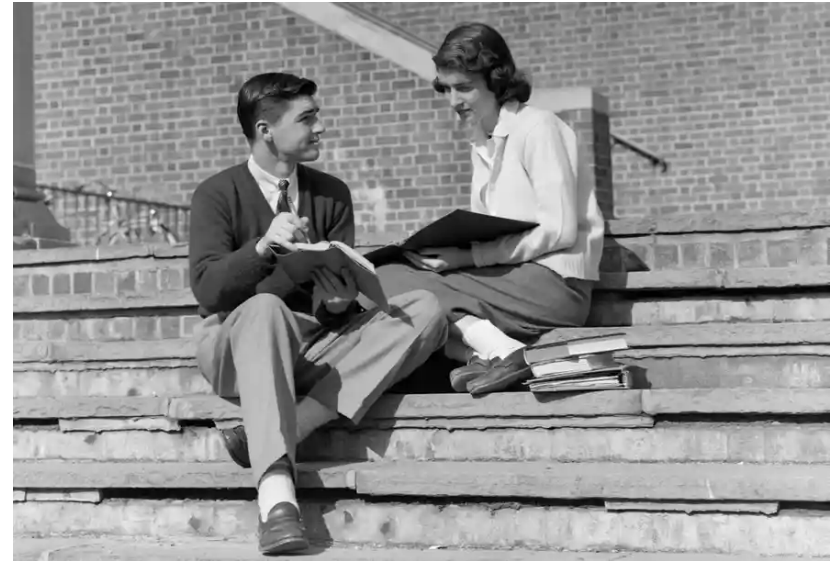
PART 1

How academia
has changed –
and why it
matters.



The changing landscape of academia

- Universities less elitist, far less clubby; many more people get tertiary qualifications today than they did fifty years ago.
- University teaching far more user-driven today – multi-modal delivery, even feedback, was unheard of in the past.



The changing landscape of academia

- University research was once far less regulated in terms of topic (what you could research) and perceived importance than it is today.
- In the 1980s, we were in transition, terrified of someone asking of our research - 'so what?' or 'why should anybody care?'
- Today 'blue sky' research is difficult; almost all research is demand-driven (=end-user-driven).



Barbara McClintock, 1983 Nobel Prize for Medicine



Why this matters

- Why this matters is that an academic's performance is still largely judged on the yardsticks of the last century (publications, grants, HDRs, reputation) ... when almost every academic was a career academic.
- But many of today's University academics have come along quite different pathways ...



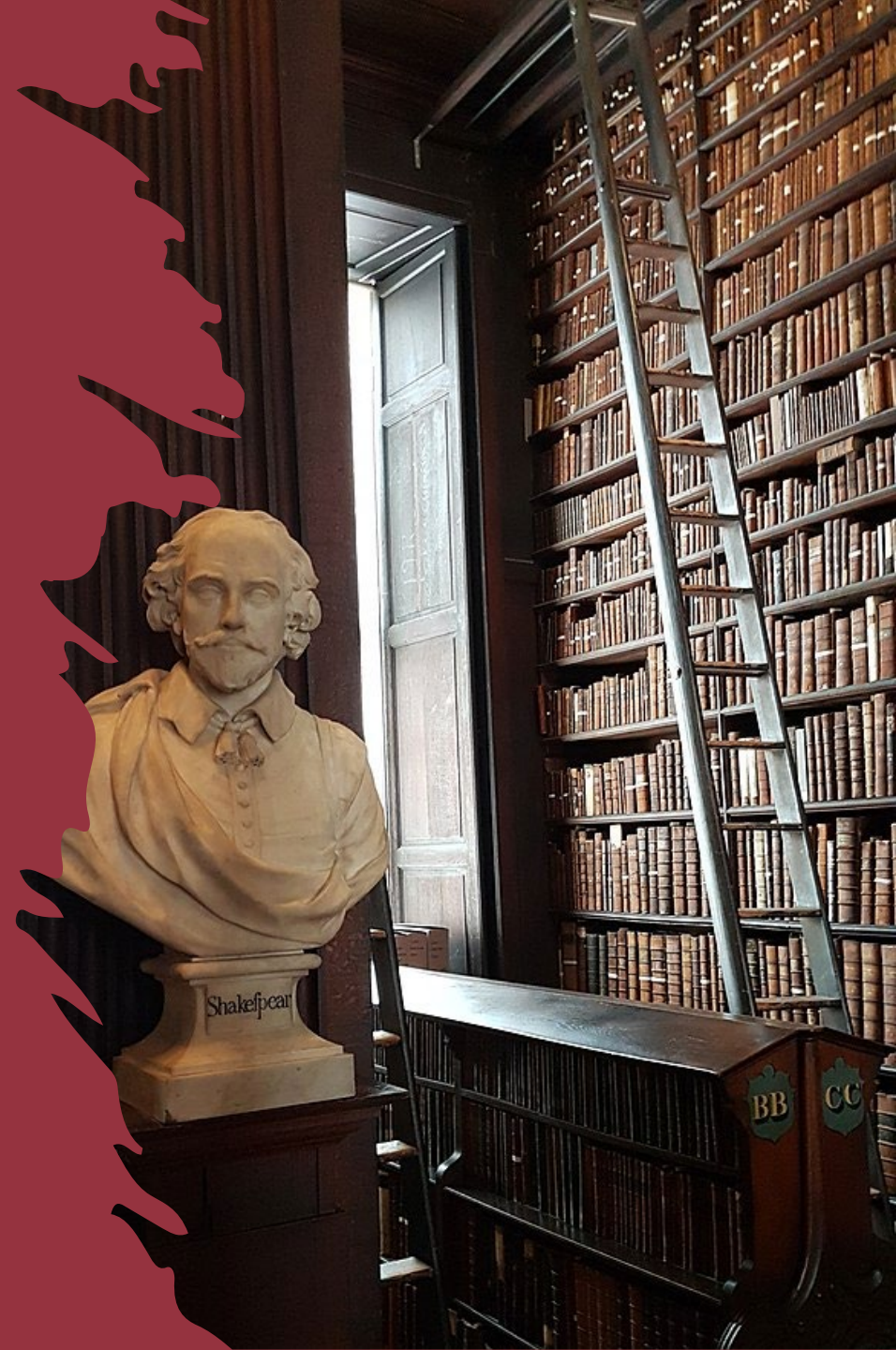
Edwin Powell Hubble (astronomer)



Michael White (narrative therapy)

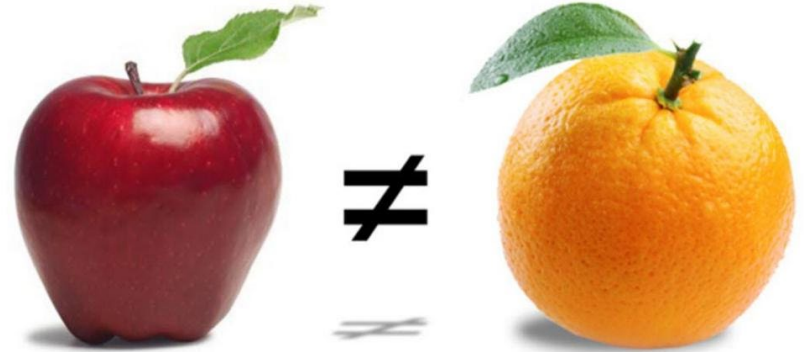
PART 2

Metrics as
measures of
institutional not
individual
quality.



Institutions are measured by their metrics

- Diverse institutions – how do you compare Harvard University *and* Maroochydore TAFE?
- Both achieve goals so why value one more than the other?
- In the same way, universities are different – GO8 and others appear different only in their degree of self-esteem not actual worth.



Academics are more than metrics

- Diverse pathways lead to diverse skills and diverse impacts.
- Impacts – cannot be captured by metrics (except in the minds of non-academics)



The system is unfair ...

- ... but it is what we have for now.
- Universities are notoriously hidebound, difficult to change – because of what geographers call ‘path dependency’.
- They will change eventually but by then their actual role in society may have changed again.
- There are many unfair systems .. and worse jobs.

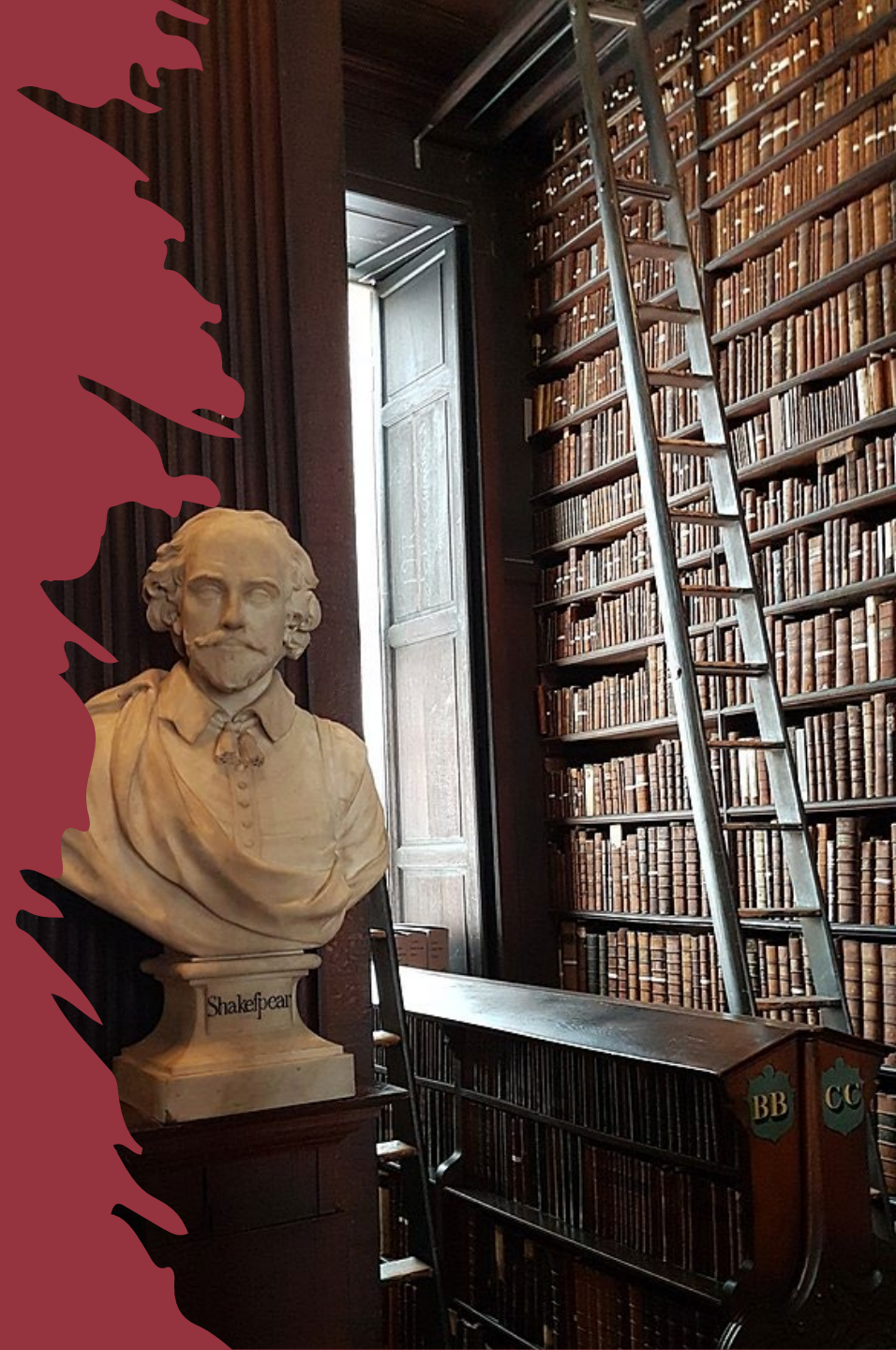
CareerCast
BEST WORST JOBS OF 2014

Rank	Job Title	Description
1.	MATHEMATICIAN	Climbing income (\$101K+) and positive employment outlook (23% growth by 2022*)
2.	UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR	19% employment increase by 2022
3.	STATISTICIAN	Statistical analysis is a booming industry
4.	ACTUARY	26% growth outlook and over \$93,000 in annual median salary
5.	AUDIOLOGIST	The aging of the Baby Boom generation means a boom for audiology
6.	DENTAL HYGIENIST	Consistently ranks in the Jobs Rated Top 10 each year
7.	SOFTWARE ENGINEER	A leading IT field both in hiring outlook (+22%) & earning potential (+93,000/year)
8.	COMPUTER SYSTEMS ANALYST	A top-20 growth potential field by 2022 at 25%
9.	OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST	A high-growth healthcare field; 29% increase expected by 2022
10.	SPEECH PATHOLOGIST	Competitive wages & positive environment pushed speech pathologist into the Top 10
1.	LUMBERJACK	Ranks bottom 10 in environment & growth potential
2.	NEWSPAPER REPORTER	13% Decline in employment by 2022*
3.	ENLISTED MILITARY PERSONNEL	Scored most stressful job of 2014
4.	TAXI DRIVER	High stress, low pay: Annual median salary is just \$22,820
5.	BROADCASTER	Stagnant salaries with high stress and falling demand
6.	HEAD COOK	Wages can vary dramatically and outlook is low
7.	FLIGHT ATTENDANT	Industry turbulence has grounded hiring
8.	GARBAGE COLLECTOR	Average annual salary is below \$23,000, and automation has slowed hiring
9.	FIREFIGHTER	Danger is inherent, as FEMA reports 104 on-duty deaths in 2013
10.	CORRECTIONS OFFICER	Stressful conditions make for an especially challenging work environment

<http://www.careercast.com/jobs-rated/best-jobs-2014>
* salary and outlook data via U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

PART 3

Strengthening
self-belief: not-
mentoring as
mentoring?



Strengthening self-belief

- The danger of metrics is that they encourage to judge ourselves inadequate and under-performing.
- Actually we could be the best we can be.



Strengthening self-belief

- Many academics feel isolated, alone, especially in a small university where you might be the only person with your specialist interests.
- Mentoring can help.



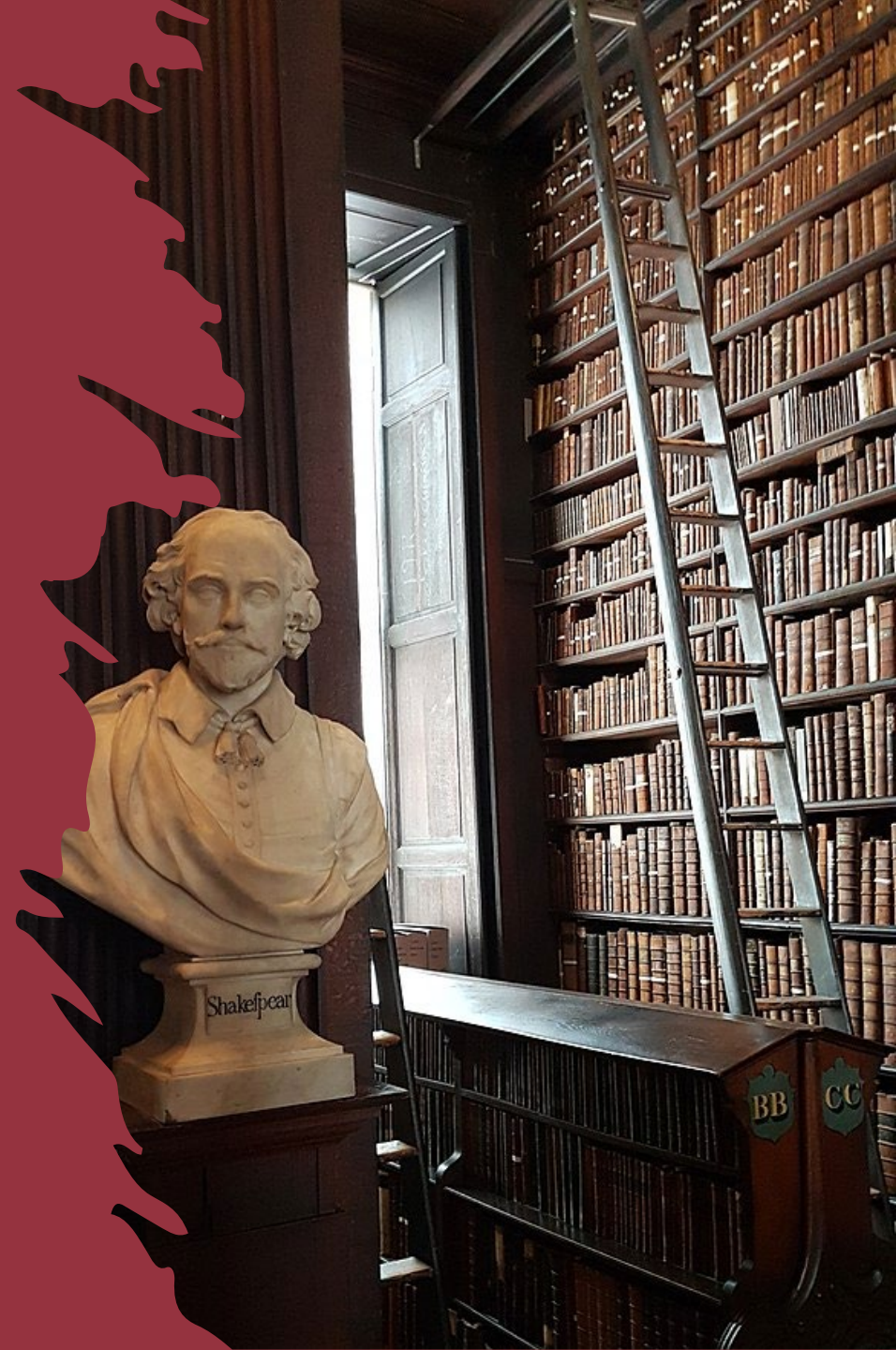
“But I don’t want another PhD supervisor”

- Mentoring can be a bit like Julia Banks’s wallpaper – ever-present, threatening.
- To my mind, the best type of mentoring for many academics is *not-mentoring*.
- Not-mentoring is having a friend to chat to, someone who has walked a similar path to the one you are on.



PART 4

What I find
useful.



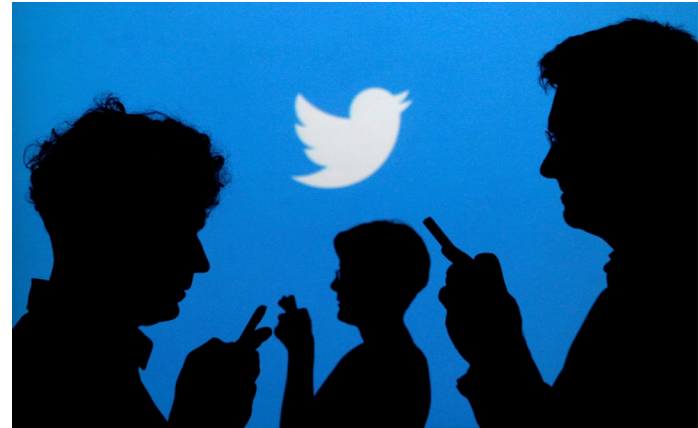
Developing a professional profile

- Get an **ORCID** identifier
– free from orcid.org
- Join **LinkedIn**
- Join **Twitter** but be mostly serious (keep the personal stuff for *Facebook*)
- Sign on to **Publons**.
- Create a **Google Scholar** profile.
- Update your **USC website** regularly.



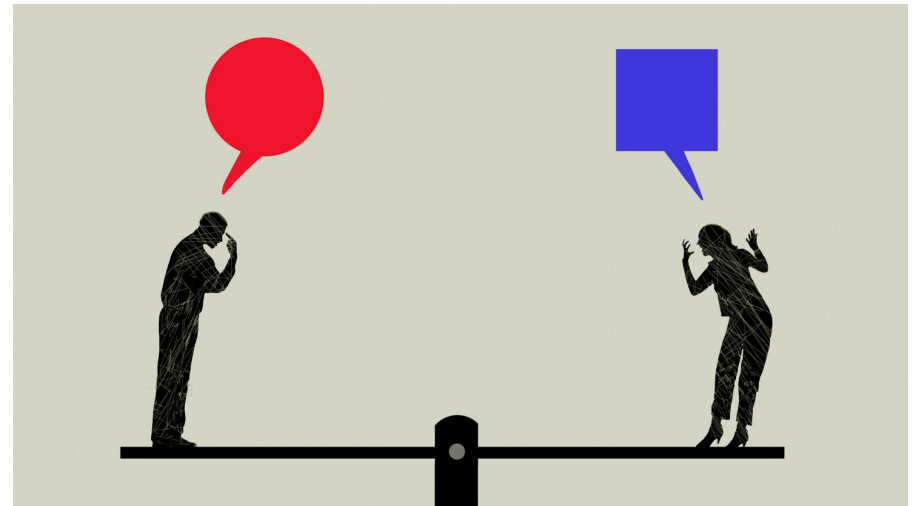
DISTINGUISH YOURSELF IN THREE EASY STEPS

- 1 REGISTER
- 2 ADD YOUR INFO
- 3 USE YOUR ORCID ID



Broaden your scope (move out of your comfort zone)

- Collaborate across disciplines within SLS and USC.
- If you cannot understand, ask – we are in the business of communication not obfuscation.
- Be collegial not combative.





Internationalise
yourself

- Collaborate beyond borders
- Non-western contexts represent opportunities
- Be brave



Write for different audiences

- Your readers are all that matter.
- Tailor your communications to different audiences.

Consider a
book



Jorge Méndez Blake –
The impact one book can make

Some helpful readings ..

- Lyons, K. 2021. Academic freedom's precarious future. Special issue of *Australian Universities' Review*, 63(1). Free online.
- Merga, M.K. and Mason, S. 2021. Unis want research shared widely. So why don't they properly back academics to do it? *The Conversation*, 11 January 2021.
- Yunkaporta, T. 2020. *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. Melbourne: Text.

