



# VPL on Trial

Why do learners generally  
give up and go away or  
“just take the d\*\*\*\*ed course”?

Don Presant & Serge Ravet





# For you, the jury to decide...

Has VPL fulfilled its promise of inclusion, empowerment and the democratic recognition of lifewide learning?

Or is it just another tool of the academic autocracy, a binary sorting hat for deciding what has value and who does not, wrapped in the warm, fuzzy blanket of paternalistic charity?

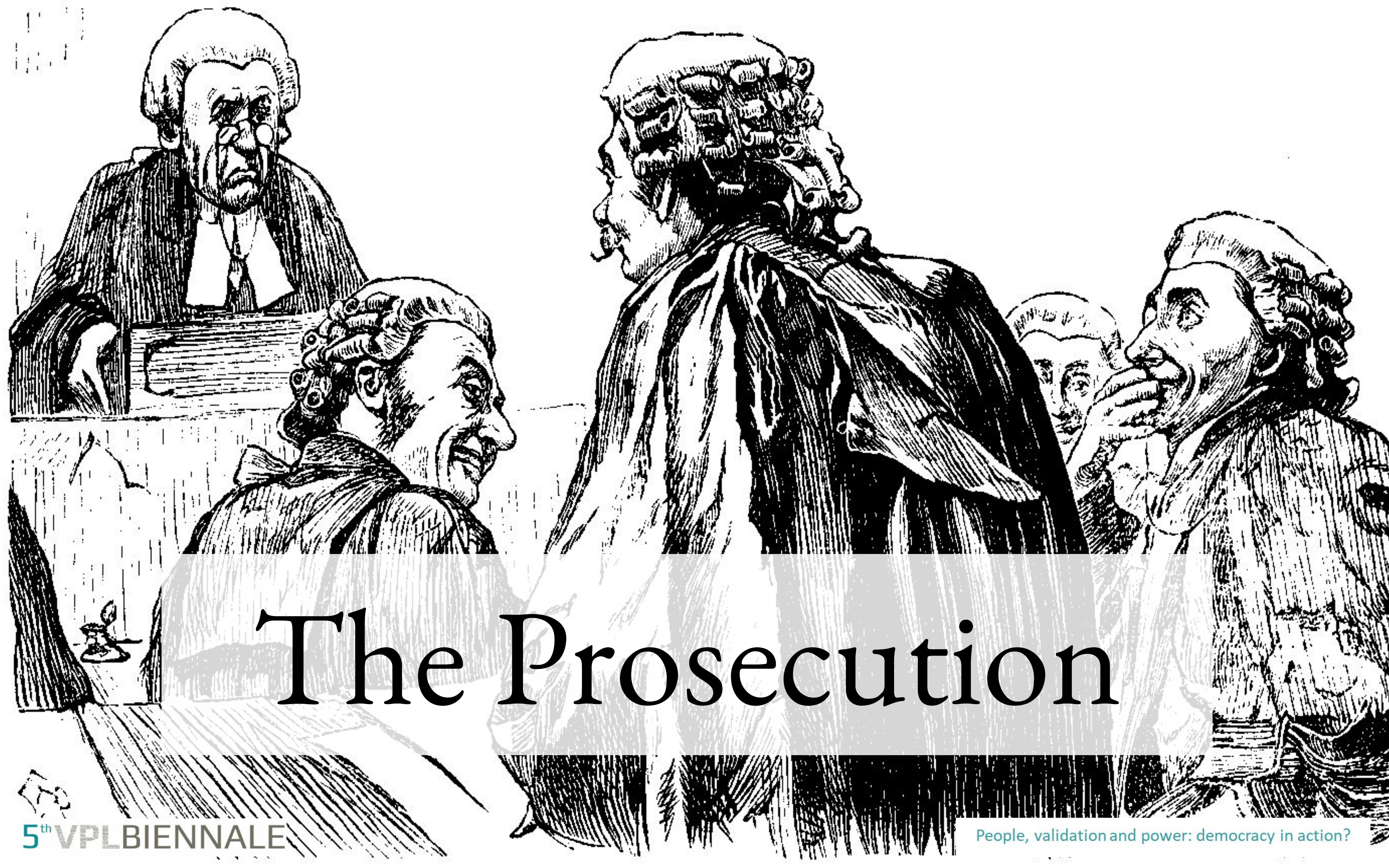




# The Charges

- VPL has failed to be the authentic voice of empowered citizens who learn lifewide. VPL practice is dominated by academic concerns and has not contributed to overcoming the epistemological arrogance of academic institutions as self-appointed terminal validators of knowledge and skilled practice. The asymmetric power of formal, academic recognition has not been reduced.
- VPL has failed to produce significant cultural change in education, particularly in HE, featuring only flickering pockets of ephemeral transformation that wither on the vine like doomed mutations.





# The Prosecution





# Opening arguments for the Prosecution

## Epistocracy vs Academic Autocracy

- VPL does not empower the individual, it consolidates the asymmetrical power of institutions, enforcing terminal knowledge compliance to its internal standards, ignoring the value of appreciative inquiry and knowledge creation and demonstrating little understanding of the transformation of recognition across lifewide contexts, from informal to non-formal and, sometimes, formal
- VPL is about validating the “prior learning” of... the academic institution formalised in its disciplines and curricula; external knowledge and skills that do not match its store are not recognised. *While it could (and should) be a knowledge collector*, it remains a restrictive filter.
- VPL prizes individual performance and peer competition over collective cooperation in groups, organisations and communities.





# Opening arguments for the Prosecution

## Epistocracy vs Academic Autocracy

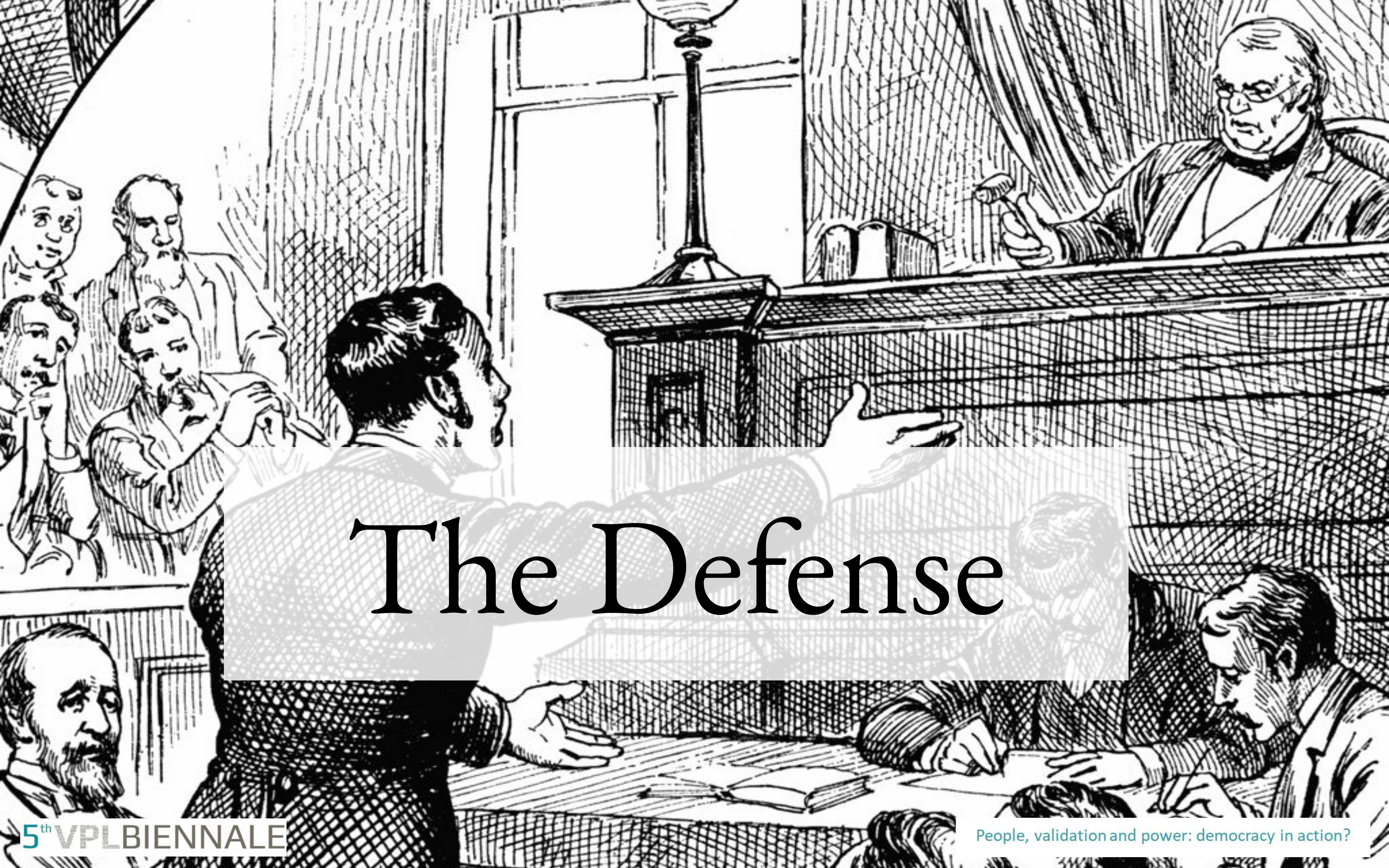
- VPL has not made teaching and learning more inclusive, it is a gatekeeping exercise in “vigilant rigour” that serves and protects the proprietary business needs of the academy.
- The European Guidelines are full of “shoulds” with few “musts” and no weight behind them. How does an institution demonstrate its level of VPL maturity? What is the consequence if a department or faculty or institution refuses to make VPL a serious part of its recognition policy? Even in countries that require VPL (France - VAE) it remains a marginal practice.
- There are few large datasets about the outcomes of VPL as a practice. Those that do exist\* report a very low rate of engagement, particularly in historically excluded populations. Most students give up and either go away or “just take the d\*\*\*\*ned course”  
\* (CAEL/WICHE 2020: 11% → only 3.3% was non-military articulation), (NCVER 2020: 4.8%)
- Final irony: most university faculty are not formally qualified to actually teach – how dare they inflict their unvalidated teaching practices on the tender minds of students?  
... or could there be value in less formal types of recognition?



# Evidence for the Prosecution

- Validation means a **process of confirmation** by an **authorised body** that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a **relevant standard** (EU Council Recommendation 2012)
- *When education and training institutions are given the role of validating the learning outcomes acquired outside formal education institutions, education institutions become gate-keepers, determining whether non-formal and informal learning at work and in life is up to the standards of learning in formal education and training. This has been connected to the power of epistemologies and to an increasing risk of exclusion of certain knowledge and some disadvantage groups. (CEDEFOP EU Guideines p21)*
- Supply-side financial models for education and training can disincentivise validation by “discounting education programmes.” (ib. p28)
- Educational curriculum in Europe is only now shifting from inputs to outcomes (ib. p37)
- Quality assurance is focused on “trust in results” rather than service to the learner (ib. p46)
- *VAE remains marginal compared to the awarding of diplomas obtained through initial training. Applications remain concentrated on a small number of qualifications, mostly in the health and social sector. (CEDEFOP EU Inventory - France 2018)*





# The Defense





# Opening arguments for the Defense

## Transformation takes time

- Validation of skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning has made steady progress from its beginnings as PLA in the 1970s and is increasingly accepted as a key element in European skills policies.
- Validation is NOT monolithic. It has four distinct phases, **identification**, **documentation**, **assessment** and **certification**. Different phases will be emphasized, depending on the specific needs of the individual. For example, in **volunteering**, more emphasis is given to identification and documentation (more **formative**), less to formal assessment and certification (more **summative**). The purpose is to **make visible** the outcomes, not to formalise them by awarding qualifications. European guidelines (2023)
- Formal validation can be very important to the lives and careers of many people, but all forms of VPL provide significant benefits, including a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Learners who have undergone academic VPL demonstrate significantly increased retention and improved performance.





# Opening arguments for the Defense

## Transformation takes time

- VPL can reduce social inequality by providing onramps to formal education for historically excluded populations, and also provide a second chance for those who may have left education early. Validation can also play a major role in workforce recruitment and skills development.
- VPL provides a useful catalyst for innovation in learning and development, triggering such innovations as the incremental Credential As You Go and finding synergies with innovative new technologies such as AI.
- VPL is also opening up to new perspectives, such as Indigenous ways of knowing, in pioneering work by the International Indigenous RPL Collective and institutions such as Thompson Rivers University.
- Validation should support transition, but there are challenges in aligning reference points that all parties can agree on. This can lead to “A & B certificates”, where B is seen as having lesser value. European guidelines (2023)
- The field is steadily advancing - give it more time!

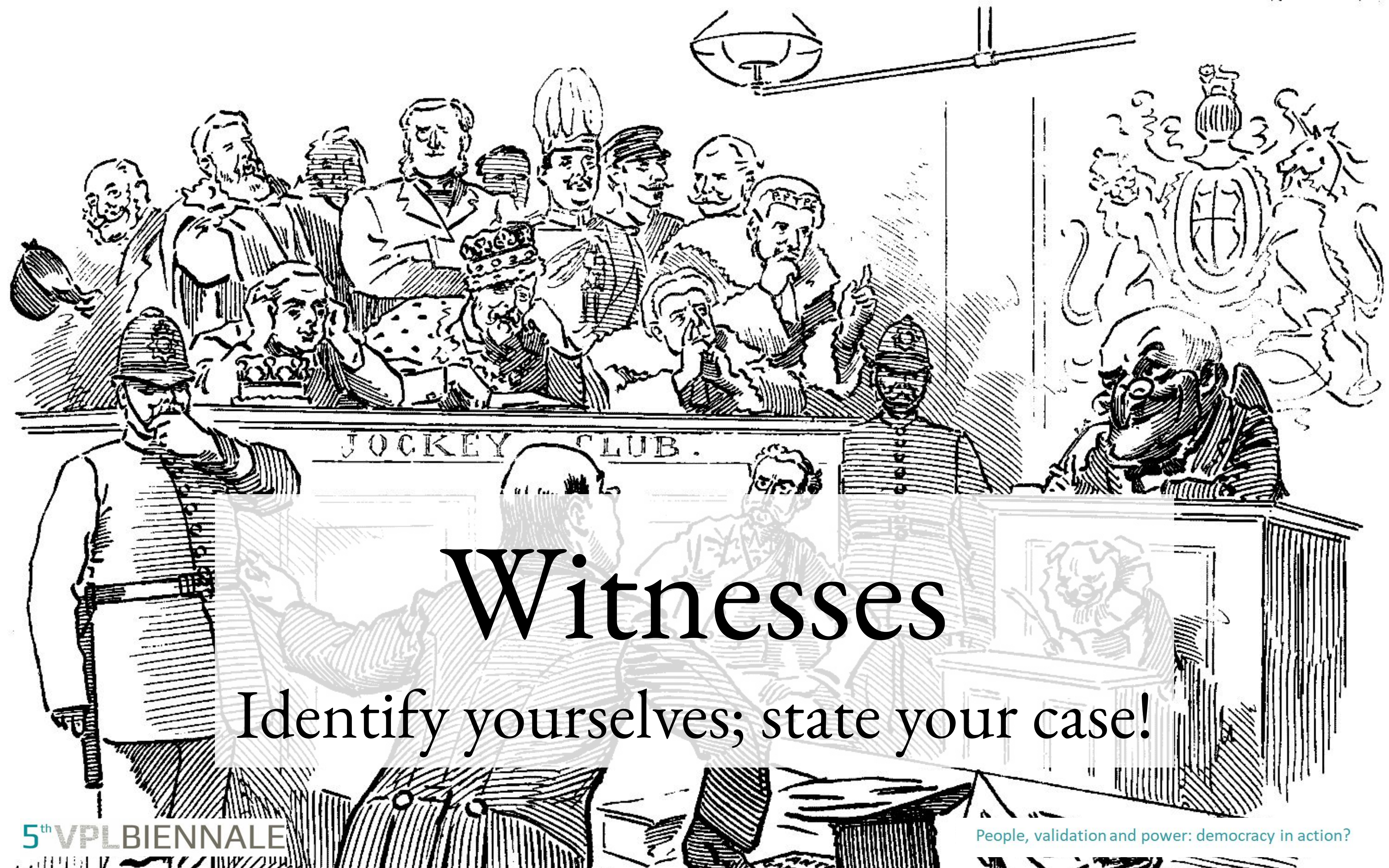




## Evidence for the Defense

- **Demand-side funding** can empower learners (and employers) and incentivise validation (CEDEFOP EU Guidelines p29)
- Validation has an important role to play in the portability and stackability of digital badges (ib. p39)
- PLA students studied across 72 institutions in the US were more likely to complete college credentials than non-PLA students (49% > 27%), with better marks (PLA Boost 2020)





# Witnesses

Identify yourselves; state your case!





# The Jury





# Instructions to the Jury

Is VPL innocent or guilty as charged?

If guilty, what is the sentence:

- Death (a humane one)
- Parole
- Probation





# Members of the jury - recognise yourselves!

- Did you learn something in this session?  
Something you really liked or really hated?  
Tell us about it! Earn a **Today I Learned** badge...  
How will you take it forward? Or bury it forever?  
(Reflect, reflect, reflect....)



[bit.ly/VPL24-ORA](https://bit.ly/VPL24-ORA)





# VPL on Trial

Join us in Paris Nov 6-8  
for more fun and provocation!  
[epic.openrecognition.org](http://epic.openrecognition.org)

**ePIC 2024**

Paris, 6-8 November

Opening and Scaling up digital credential initiatives



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5<sup>th</sup> VPL BIENNALE

People, validation and power: democracy in action?