



universität  
wien

Gender Equality  
and Diversity

# Steps to successful habilitation

A guide



## Preface



On the occasion of the 650th anniversary of the University of Vienna, the philologist Elise Richter and six other female academics were honoured in a festive ceremony. Elise Richter was the first woman to receive the so-called habilitation degree from the University of Vienna in 1905. In 1907 she became the first woman to be granted the formal authorisation to teach at the University. In remembrance of her and the six other women pioneers, monuments designed by various artists have been erected in the University's arcaded courtyard.

During the last hundred years, many women have followed in Elise Richter's footsteps. The process of habilitation, which is to show the highest level of academic achievement, is complex and involves a series of different steps. In addition to academic competence, strategy also plays an important role in this process. This is why strategic considerations, along with the relevant legal framework, form the focus of this information leaflet.

The idea for this publication was based on experience gained in a workshop entitled "Habilitation – approaching an academic ritual", which the Gender Equality and Diversity Unit, in cooperation with academic coach Ute Riedler, has offered for post-doctoral researchers for some years now. As the share of women among academics with authorisation to teach at the University of Vienna is still significantly below that of men, this leaflet aims in particular to encourage women who want to acquire this high-level qualification to take up the challenge.

### **Irene Rottensteiner**

Head of Human Resources and Gender Equality

### **Sylwia Bukowska**

Head of the Gender Equality and Diversity Unit

# The habilitation procedure

The habilitation degree (German "Habilitation") is proof of the highest level of academic achievement, conferring on successful candidates the authorisation to teach (German "Lehrbefugnis", Latin "venia docendi") for an entire academic or artistic subject.

In order to be eligible for this authorisation, applicants must demonstrate academic or artistic excellence, as well as didactic competence.

Authorisation to teach involves the right to exercise the freedom of academic teaching in the respective discipline, using the facilities of the University of Vienna, as well as to supervise and assess academic work. Academics holding this qualification but not a professorship are referred to as "PrivatdozentIn" (i.e. non-tenured associate professors).

In Austria, the legal provisions for habilitation are laid down in Section 103 of the 2002 Universities Act. Within this framework, more detailed rules may be specified in the statutes of the respective university. The information provided in this leaflet is based on the Statutes of the University of Vienna of 29 March 2014. The relevant provisions of the Universities Act are also outlined in the middle section. These explanations are supplemented by strategic guidelines in the form of information and advice, independent of specific academic disciplines.

Finally, it should be noted that certain aspects may vary greatly from faculty to faculty or even from discipline to discipline. This may concern questions such as whether a monograph or a series of individual papers will be accepted as a habilitation thesis, or the issue of assessing academic qualifications based on publications and other academic achievements. Furthermore, the significance of having formal authorisation to teach as a prerequisite for obtaining a professorship may vary and is actually declining in some disciplines, especially in the natural sciences.

# Experiences



*At the beginning I was totally fascinated by my topic. Then came the painstaking work on the details and with it a sense of disillusionment which was, however, mitigated by a series of “small victories” whenever yet another chapter seemed successfully completed. Once I had reached the home stretch, I thought again and again that the finish line was merely weeks away – but the weeks turned into months. So my habilitation process was characterised by two words in particular: enthusiasm and endurance.*

**Christina Binder**, international law



*A habilitation degree in the life sciences is often regarded as obsolete and unnecessary for your career nowadays. Looking back, however, I experienced it as a process of emerging academic independence. The recognition I got from the academic community was extremely satisfying.*

**Verena Jantsch-Plunger**, molecular biology



*For the successful completion of the habilitation process it is important to be familiar with all the formal rules – the legal experts in the Personnel Unit proved very competent and supportive in this respect. In addition to that, informal knowledge about structures, processes and established practice at the department and faculty levels is highly relevant as well.*

**Ulrike Zartler**, sociology



# History

*I believe that academic talent manifests itself in two abilities: the first is the ability to identify problems; the second is having sufficient energy for the pursuit of proof – this is essential everywhere, but especially in the field of philology.*

**Elise Richter**



Monument in honour of Elise Richter in the arcaded courtyard of the University of Vienna  
Artist: Catrin Bolt; photograph: derknopfdrucker.com

In 1905 the philologist Elise Richter became the first woman to receive a habilitation degree from the University of Vienna. In 1907 the Federal Ministry of Education awarded her the formal authorisation to teach (*venia docendi*). In 1921 she became an associate professor, again the first woman to do so. She researched and taught at the University of Vienna until her authorisation was revoked in 1938 because of her Jewish background. Elise Richter died in 1943 in the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

As part of the festivities for the 650th anniversary of the University of Vienna, Elise Richter was honoured with a monument in the University's arcaded courtyard.

## 1

**Deciding to go for habilitation:**

Is a career in academic research and teaching what I want?

Is a habilitation degree required for a professorship/a further career in my discipline?

What achievements must I show to get this degree? Are there any specific regulations at my faculty/my department?

What have past habilitation theses in my discipline looked like? ▶

Habilitation serves the purpose of formally establishing the academic excellence and didactic competence required for the authorisation to teach a subject within the purview of the University of Vienna (the so-called “*venia docendi*”, German “*Lehrbefugnis*”).\* ▶

The Rectorate is authorised to award, upon application, the authorisation to teach for an entire academic or artistic subject. The “*venia docendi*” being sought must be within the purview of the respective university. Authorisation to teach involves the right to exercise the freedom of academic teaching in the respective discipline at the respective university, using that university’s facilities, and to supervise and assess academic or artistic work. ▶

## ▶ 2

**Getting support:**

Who will support my habilitation within my academic discipline?

Who can provide strategic advice?

Who can give me feedback on my work?

How can I ensure/increase the visibility of my achievements within the University/the academic community?

Where can I expect support in my private life?

How can I organise the phase of intensive work on my thesis to have enough working time while balancing my professional and private lives? ▶

▶ ▶

▶ ▶

### ▶ 3

#### Developing the profile of your academic work:

What do I excel at?

How broadly or narrowly should I define my envisaged “*venia docendi*”? Review your own past work and the established practice within your discipline. A “*venia*” that is too broad may be rejected, one that is too narrow may be disadvantageous when applying for professorships.

How should I design my academic work to demonstrate the required “academic excellence”?

How can I demonstrate the required “ability to advance the discipline” I work in?

What have I already achieved, what is still missing? ▶

The habilitation thesis must address a topic different from that of the applicant’s doctoral thesis, or constitute a distinct advance on the academic work shown in that thesis.\* ▶

In order to be awarded the authorisation to teach, the applicant must be proven to have excellent academic or artistic qualifications and to have repeatedly taught his/her subject (see 6). The work submitted must be of impeccable methodological quality, contain new academic insights, and demonstrate the applicant’s proficiency in his/her academic discipline and his/her ability to advance this discipline. ▶

### ▶ 4

#### Deciding on a subject:

Does the designation of my chosen subject conform to international standards?

If your academic (sub-) discipline goes by a different name internationally, aim at using the common international term. Argue this convincingly and in good time within your department and faculty.

If your thesis is to be interdisciplinary, check whether you need to decide on one subject or whether you can apply for a dual “*venia*”. ▶

The members of the habilitation committee and the reviewers can be selected on an interdisciplinary basis.\* ▶

▶ ▶

### ▶ 5

#### Cumulative approach or “opus magnum”?

Which of these is customary at my faculty and in my discipline?

What is the international trend?

Where should I publish in order to raise the international visibility of my work?

Where and in what language do I want to publish my monograph to ensure international visibility?

Can I present or publish excerpts from my habilitation thesis in advance to remain visible to my own academic community while working on my thesis?

Get written agreement from your co-authors regarding your respective shares in joint publications. Make sure you do this in good time. ▶

The habilitation thesis can comprise one individual academic paper or several thematically connected academic publications.

If any of the work submitted for habilitation has more than one author, the applicant must show proof of his/her share in this work.\* ▶

▶ ▶

## ▶ 6

### Developing your teaching profile:

Have I done enough teaching at a university or university of applied science?

Does my teaching reflect comprehensive as well as in-depth knowledge of my discipline?

Actively seek further teaching assignments if necessary.

Have I received good evaluations on my teaching so far?

If necessary, actively seek to have your teaching evaluated. ▶



In order to be awarded the authorisation to teach, the applicant must be proven to have excellent academic or artistic qualifications, as well as didactic competence as evidenced by having taught repeatedly at recognised post-secondary educational establishments. ▶

## ▶ 7

### Submitting your application:

Talk to the Dean and inform him/her about your upcoming application before submitting it.

Check that the application is complete.

Pay the application fee. ▶

The application for habilitation is to be submitted in writing to the Rectorate via the Dean's office or the office of the Centre responsible for the "venia docendi" being sought, stating an entire academic subject for which authorisation to teach is being requested.\* ▶

The application for habilitation is to be submitted to the Rectorate, which forwards it to the Senate unless it is to be rejected due to lack of competence on the part of the university. ▶

## ▶ 8

### Considering the assessment procedure:

Consider the possibility of conflicts between the existence of academic networks and the availability of independent reviewers.

Therefore avoid close cooperation (e.g. research projects, joint publications) with colleagues who might qualify as reviewers while working on your habilitation thesis. ▶

Based on a proposal by the professors in the discipline concerned, the professors on the University Senate appoint at least three representatives of the relevant discipline, at least two of them external, to review the academic work submitted.\* ▶

Based on a proposal by the professors in the discipline concerned, the professors on the University Senate appoint at least two representatives of the relevant discipline, at least one of whom should be external, to review the academic or artistic work submitted. However, they may delegate this task to the professors in the discipline concerned and a related discipline. ▶



## ▶ 9

### Appointment of the habilitation committee:



The Senate sets the number of members of the habilitation committee, which must not exceed nine.

Mid-level faculty members and students are represented by at least one member each. The subject of the habilitation thesis must be taken into account when appointing the committee.\* ▶

The Senate appoints a committee empowered to decide on the application for habilitation. Professors must make up more than half of the members of this committee, which must also include at least one student representative. ▶

## ▶ 10

### Proving academic competence:

If appropriate, submit other academic work along with your habilitation thesis (see 6), to be taken into account in the assessment process. ▶

The reviewers assess the applicant's academic qualifications based on his/her habilitation thesis and any other academic work submitted, within a period of no more than three months. The reviewers' task is to establish whether the work is of impeccable methodological quality, contains new academic insights and demonstrates the applicant's proficiency in his/her subject area, as well as his/her ability to advance this subject area.

Any academic work not submitted need not be considered in the assessment process.\* ▶



## ▶ 11

### Exercising your right of access:

If appropriate, submit an opinion of your own or an additional assessment report. If appropriate, obtain feedback from your colleagues on the reports submitted. ▶

Once all assessment reports have been submitted, the chairperson of the committee sets a period of at least two weeks during which the habilitation thesis, any additional academic publications, and the reports submitted are accessible for inspection.

Opinions on the assessment reports may be submitted for up to two weeks after the end of the inspection period.

The applicant may express his/her opinion on the assessment reports and submit any additional reports he/she has obtained for up to two weeks after the end of the inspection period.\* ▶

Professors in the relevant academic discipline and closely related disciplines are entitled to express their opinions on the assessment reports submitted. ▶

## ▶ 12

### Preparing for your thesis defence (or “colloquium”):

Prepare your presentation.

Consider any criticism expressed in the assessment reports and address it in your presentation if appropriate.

Prepare for friendly as well as critical questions on your presentation.

Invite your colleagues and students.

Check the room and the technical equipment in advance. ▶

▶ ▶

▶ ▶

## ▶ 13

### Proving your didactic competence:

Submit teaching evaluations and/or proof of training in higher education didactics along with your application or present them in the course of the habilitation process. ▶

At least two members of the habilitation committee, including one student and one representative of the University’s academic staff, draw up assessment reports on the applicant’s didactic competence.

The habilitation committee may obtain further reports and opinions on this matter. ▶

Documentation of repeated teaching at recognised post-secondary educational institutions is required to establish the applicant’s didactic competence. ▶

## ▶ 14

### Your thesis defence (or “colloquium”):

Welcome the members of the habilitation committee, any reviewers present, as well as your colleagues and students.

Keep eye contact with the audience.

Remain calm.

Present your academic findings convincingly and enthusiastically.

Respond calmly to critical questions. ▶

The habilitation committee publicly discusses with the applicant his/her academic publications and the assessment reports and opinions submitted on these.\* ▶

▶ ▶

## ▶ 15

### Decision on your application:

You may withdraw your application for the award of a habilitation degree at any point until the committee issues its decision. ▶

The habilitation committee decides whether the applicant has provided the requisite proof of his/her outstanding academic qualifications. This decision requires the majority of those committee members who have the authorisation to teach ("venia docendi").

Furthermore, the committee decides whether the applicant has provided the requisite proof of his/her didactic competence. The overall decision is positive only if both of its parts are positive.\* ▶

The habilitation committee makes its decision on the basis of the assessment reports and opinions received. On this basis the Rectorate issues an official notice of the decision on the application for habilitation. An appeal against this notice can be lodged with the Federal Administrative Court. In the case of serious procedural defects the Rectorate remands the decision to the habilitation committee. Award of the authorisation to teach neither establishes an employment relationship nor modifies an existing one. ▶

## ▶ 16

### Maintaining your authorisation to teach:

Make sure you teach at least once within a period of four years so that your authorisation to teach does not expire, or give a reason why you cannot teach.

Get confirmation of any teaching you do at universities outside Austria and present these to the University of Vienna.

The authorisation to teach ("venia docendi") expires

1. upon renunciation;
2. due to failure to exercise it over a period of four years without giving reasons;
3. following a conviction handed down by an Austrian court which would lead to forfeiture of office for a civil servant.\*\*

\*) Points 1-15:

*Section on "Habilitation" of the Statutes of the University of Vienna of 29 March 2014.*

\*\*) Point 16:

*Section on "Expiry of authorisation to teach" (Erlöschen der Lehrbefugnis) of the Statutes of the University of Vienna of 22 January 2004.*

## Imprint

### **Publisher:**

#### **Gender Equality and Diversity Unit, University of Vienna**

Universitätsring 1, 1010 Vienna, Austria

femail@univie.ac.at

gleichstellung.univie.ac.at

### **Authors:**

Ute Riedler, academic coach; Kerstin Tiefenbacher and Ursula Wagner,  
Gender Equality and Diversity Unit

Based on materials by Ute Riedler, uteriedler.at

**Photo credits:** derknopfdrucker.com, University of Vienna;

Barbara Mair, University of Vienna; Photo Simonis

**Graphic design:** Inga Seidl, ingaseidl.com

**Print:** Wograndl Druck Mattersburg

Vienna, January 2017