

Writing my master thesis at MST in USA using ESTA

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7. avgust 2019

I wanted to write my master thesis in the USA using the contact provided by prof. dr. Andrej Kos on the Missouri University of Science and Technology (MST). We started talking about this exchange at the beginning of November 2018. At that point, the procedure to get the bilateral agreement between the two universities was already started. However, the agreement was signed in February 2019 and then the procedure to get an Erasmus annex was started. Erasmus annex was signed in the middle of March. As all of this took quite a lot of time, there was not a lot of time left for the administrative process as I had to come back from the USA until August 2019 and the exchange had to last at least 3 months for the Erasmus agreement to work.

I started asking around what my options are regarding a Visa. Getting an official answer from the US Embassy in Ljubljana was a very lengthy and difficult process. I tried getting answers also from the Slovenian consulate in Washington, Erasmus officials at the University of Ljubljana and the professor in the USA. Nobody could give me a definite answer if ESTA is enough or I need to apply for a VISA. At the beginning of May the professor in the USA, after asking a few people, confirmed if I want any official status at the MST university, a lengthy application process would be needed with the proof of language capabilities required before even getting the right documentation to apply for a J-1 exchange VISA. The estimated time for all of this procedures was at least 3 months and this was too much for me, as I needed to return until August for my scholarship in Slovenia. Therefore a compromise was needed with no other VISA than ESTA.

If I went with ESTA it meant I would have no official status at the MST (no card with my name on it) and therefore no access to the internet other than Eduroam, no entrance to some builds like the library and the gym and a couple of other problems. Despite this, I decided to go with ESTA, which also meant I have to go for less than 3 months (which is a bit contradictory to the Erasmus agreement which demands at least 3 months and actually makes the Erasmus agreement quite useless for my case). There were a lot of compromises I had to cope with at the university, however, the professor Sedigh was very helpful and with some effort, I managed.

The main factor was that the accommodation at the university campus did not require me to have official status, just for the professor to vouch for me. I had to pay approximately 1100\$ for 2 months and 10 days of accommodation, which was quite acceptable to me. If I could not get this accommodation, I would probably not take part of this exchange, as it provided me with an opportunity to experience the real American campus life and more importantly meet a lot of interesting people and make new connections.

Regarding the funding situation, there is a scholarship for studying abroad by Javni štipendijski, razvojni, invalidski in preživninski sklad Republike Slovenije. I applied for that and it required quite a lot of documentation, the list of which is available on their website. However, as my exchange was at the end of the 2018/2019 school year, the fund was depleted and my application refused. The contact person with the fund recommended me to re-apply when the new school year starts and a new call for applications is opened. It is yet to be seen if this works and I can obtain any funds. From my research, this is maybe the only real option to get some financing and could probably amount up to 1500 for my duration of stay in

the USA.

During the exchange, I talked with other students that were in a similar situation. I talked with other European students that were also writing their master thesis at MST. Some were staying for a full 6 months. All of them were there using a VISA, however not exactly J-1. They said they started with all the preparations at the same time as me, and that makes me think that even in the amount of time I had, I could obtain the proper documentation to officially visit MST without using Erasmus. Waiting for an Erasmus agreement consumed the most time, however other European students did the master thesis exchange without any framework like Erasmus. I do not know the exact details, but they said their status with the MST was more like a volunteer or a worker and not as a student. I think this simplified the whole process and excluded the need of using Erasmus or a similar framework for their exchange.

In conclusion, in the case of an another exchange, if the Erasmus agreement is needed, the needed time for the whole procedure is very unpredictable and the preparations for the exchange should start at least 6–9 months prior as the process of getting the VISA even after the Erasmus is signed can take more than 3 months. However, an alternative way that I described should be considered and researched more, as it seems to me it could be a simpler and shorter way of writing a thesis at another USA university that has no agreement with the UNI LJ other than the contact between professors.

In the end, I am very happy I participated in this exchange, even if with some compromises and I would recommend it to anyone that is interested. If the reader of this document is interested in more details about this exchange, please feel free to contact me at primozkocevar@outlook.com.