

FIELD REPORT

REGARDING THE AUSTRIAN MARSHALL PLAN FOUNDATION EXCHANGE PROGRAM
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES, CA, USA

GENERAL INFORMATION

The exchange program took place at the Data Science Laboratory (<http://dslab.usc.edu/>) at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles (<https://www.usc.edu/>). The Data Science Laboratory is part of the Viterbi School of Engineering (<https://viterbischool.usc.edu/>). My main supervisor at the Data Science Laboratory was Prof. Viktor K. Prasanna (<http://halcyon.usc.edu/~pk/prasannawebsite/index.php/>) and my main contact person from the Data Science Laboratory office was Kathy Kassar

OVERALL IMPRESSION OF THE RESEARCH PERIOD

Regarding the overall impression of the research period, I have to say that it was a very interesting experience that also required a large portion of self-organization, time management and assertiveness. While the support of the Data Science Laboratory office was great when something was needed, one had to make sure himself that everything necessary was taken care of. The team itself was very friendly but also very different compared to the team that I was used to from the Salzburg University of Applied Sciences (SUAS) research center. At SUAS, for example, it was common that sometimes all the team members went to lunch together. At USC, almost everyone went to have lunch by himself or ate in front of his desk. Additionally, joint adventures after work were very rare and almost every time had to be initiated by myself and seldom were initiated by the team at USC. Moreover, due to the fact that I was a “research associate” and not a “student”, that takes part at regular classes, it was more difficult to get to know other people at USC (except of the team members at the Data Science Laboratory).

The working times were very flexible, which necessitated a good time management but also gave the flexibility of skipping a day during the week and replacing it with a day on the weekend. Los Angeles is an extremely large city with tons of opportunities, but also dangerous in many areas and caution and common sense must be used.

The USC campus itself is very big and beautiful with lots of amenities. Unfortunately, due to the fact that I was not a “student”, most of the amenities, such as the gym or swimming pool, had to be paid. It must furthermore be noted, that the location of USC is not in the best area and therefore the surroundings are not so beautiful. Additionally, security guards are stationed at major crossings in the radius of about 2 miles around USC.

QUALITY OF THE RESEARCH INSTITUTION

I would say that the quality is very good, especially in the areas of theoretical informatics, algorithms, graph theory and various data science concepts. Prof. Viktor K. Prasanna himself is a well-known professor with a very good reputation. The team consist of about 10 PhD students, most of them from Asia and one from Greece. Three PhD students were in their fifth year (last year) of education and had a high level of experience and knowledge. Fortunately, I was able to regularly meet with one PhD student (Sanmukh Kuppannagari) and discuss my project with him. In general, Viterbi School of Engineering has a very good reputation.

INTEGRATION IN THE RESEARCH INSTITUTION/ORGANIZATION

The integration into the research team at the Data Science Laboratory was good. There was no welcoming event or anything, but Kathy from the office made sure, that I got the keys to my working desk (which I shared with another friend from Austria that was also at USC during my time) and that I received everything that I needed. She was always available for questions or when I needed anything.

There was a general weekly meeting with the team once a week on Friday and Prof. Prasanna was able to participate every one or two weeks. This was a good opportunity to discuss the current progress and get some ideas. Additionally, as already mentioned, there was a weekly meeting with Sanmukh, the PhD student in the last year, who also provided some feedback and help when there were any questions.

It just has to be mentioned, that you actively have to pursue your goals to get something done, initiate the meetings, make sure that the meetings take place, be consistent and remind them, when they forget about something they ensured. Self-organization and motivation is very important.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE MPS SCHOLARS/FELLOWS

Be aware, that the surrounding areas of USC are not the most beautiful areas, and that there is some crime (although less). Be also aware, that self-organization and time management is a needed skill, because many things must be organized by yourself. Be also aware, that as “research associate” you are not entitled to all the privileges that “students” have. If you want to make new friends, talk to your team members about any events, check the USC calendar for events (and go there by yourself if no one else is going), just be open and talk to other people (if you want to meet other people). There is also an event organized by the international office at the beginning of your stay, where all the other international J1 students also have to participate. This is a great opportunity to meet the other international students, where some also are from Europe. The gym is very good at USC (Lyon) and I can definitely recommend it.

Rent is much more expensive than in Austria and it is not so straightforward to find a beautiful place for yourself that is in walking distance to USC and not expensive. Regarding this, there are quite a few Facebook groups available, where students sublease their place, especially over summer (May – September/October).