

Voluntary Work Placement

Voluntary Work Placement (VWP) is what some people might still call 'work experience'. VWP can only be undertaken while you are studying and involves spending a short period of unpaid time (usually 1-10 days) with a host employer to learn more about your chosen industry/career. There are restrictions on what you can and can't do and it is separate to any compulsory Workplace Learning that may form part of your degree.

A voluntary work placement may be unpaid but it is a valuable investment in your future career. Here's why:

- **Many employers prefer graduates** who have recent relevant experience, so VWP can give you a competitive edge when applying for jobs.
- **You will gain real-life insight** into the type of work you want (or don't want) to do, develop new skills and make useful contacts who may help you secure future employment (either directly or as a referee).

Organising your work placement

You are responsible for organising your own VWP. A planned and structured approach will increase your chances of success and result in a more meaningful experience. Here are the steps you should take:

Set a clear objective

First, you need to identify the occupation/industry you wish to target. If you already have a firm idea of what that will be, VWP is a good way to get a head start. If you're still undecided, VWP can be a great way to discover if this is the right direction for you.

You then need to work out what you hope to gain/learn from the VWP so you can explain this clearly to the employer. For example, do you want to shadow a business development manager to see what they do day-to-day, observe operations at an IT start-up or learn more about what happens in government organisations?

There are limitations on what you can do during VWP. Under the Fair Work Act 2009 you cannot perform work that someone would normally be paid to do (read Charles Sturt's [Voluntary Work Placement Terms & Conditions](#) and visit the [Fair Work Ombudsman](#) website for more information).

Identify potential host employers

If you don't already have an employer in mind, start by asking yourself:

- Is there anyone who works in the occupation/industry you can talk to (such as family, friends or alumni)?
- What local businesses employ people in your occupation/industry of interest?

If this doesn't provide any leads, try searching online. Conduct a job search to find businesses that employ people in your area of interest, review professional association membership contacts, search Charles Sturt alumni in your dream job, look up online phone directories or simply type the industry and your location into your internet search engine.

Gather your information

Before you approach potential host employers you need to establish:

Is this the right employer?

It is important that you conduct thorough research before approaching an employer for VWP. Review their website or conduct further reading to get a good understanding of what they do. You also want to make sure they can provide the type of learning you require (or it could be a waste of each other's time). Research and target several potential hosts to increase your chances of success.

When am I available?

Work out the dates/times you will be available (but be prepared to be flexible) and make sure it will not clash with assessment deadlines or exams. As a guide, VWP can range from 1-10 days and can be undertaken as a concurrent block, for one day a week or a few hours a day – it's up to you and the employer to come to a mutual agreement. To obtain Charles Sturt approval (and insurance cover), in most circumstances your placement must not exceed 10 working days.

Who should I contact?

You will have greater success in organising VWP if you direct your enquiry to a particular staff member rather than sending it to a generic email address. If you have contacts in the organisation you can ask them for recommendations. If not, a quick phone call will set you in the right direction. Keep it professional and rehearse before calling, e.g.:

Good morning, my name is [your name] and I'm a current student at Charles Sturt University. I'm interested in organising voluntary workplace learning with [insert business] and was wondering if you could provide the name and contact details for the best person to talk to about this?

Make a professional approach

Once you are fully prepared, you can approach the prospective host employer via phone or email. Have a clear and professional 'pitch' that explains who you are, your reason for contacting them, what dates you are available and Charles Sturt's insurance coverage (as employers are unlikely to agree if you are not insured). E.g.:

Dear [insert contact name],

I'm currently studying [insert degree] at Charles Sturt University and am interested in organising a short period of voluntary workplace learning at [insert business name] in August or September this year. When I graduate I am interested in pursuing a career in [insert area of interest] and believe obtaining first-hand experience with your organisation will give me greater insight into this industry.

My main focus will be to gain a better understanding of what a [insert job title] does on a day-to-day basis. As a student I can obtain insurance from Charles Sturt so I am covered in your workplace. I appreciate you are busy so I will phone you next week to arrange a suitable time for me to discuss this in more detail. Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely

[your contact details]

If the employer is interested in hosting your VWP, you can then call or meet to discuss:

- The exact dates and duration of your VWP
- The tasks you will undertake (provide them with a copy of Charles Sturt's [Terms & Conditions](#) to ensure the activities will comply and they are aware of their responsibilities before they agree to VWP)
- Insurance cover provided by Charles Sturt (explain that you need to seek approval first – see below – and once approved they will receive a letter outlining these insurances in more detail).

Obtain Charles Sturt approval

Before you commence VWP you need to obtain insurance cover from Charles Sturt's Careers and Skills Hub. Apply online [here](#). If the host employer has additional requirements, these can be included as part of the Charles Sturt approval process.

Your checklist

- Identify your chosen field of work and what you want to achieve by participating in VWP (the Department of Employment's Organising work experience workbook can help with this).
- Research potential host employers thoroughly.
- Work out when you are available and who to contact.
- Make sure you have a professional email address and voicemail message and clean up your digital footprint.
- Practice a concise pitch before you approach potential employers and follow up if appropriate.
- Submit your online application for Charles Sturt insurance and only commence VWP if approval is received.

Need further help?

Book an appointment with a Career Support Officer for advice about VWP.

Visit <http://student.csu.edu.au/careers>