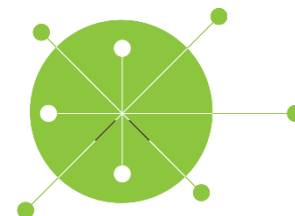


# Applying for COMS



## Becoming a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist

The Orientation and Mobility Association of Australasia (OMAA) is the peak professional body that sets the industry standards for O&M Specialists in Australia and New Zealand. The O&M industry is too small to develop and sustain an independently proctored certification program, so in 2013 the OMAA adopted the COMS program as part of the OMAA quality framework. COMS is required for one form of OMAA membership (Registered member) – other forms of membership are also available.

### Why COMS?

The COMS program provides an international benchmark for the academic standards, body of knowledge, and workplace experience required for entry-level O&M Specialists, as well as professional development requirements to recertify every five years. There are many pathways to becoming an O&M Specialist, with more than 20 professional training programs available in Australia and New Zealand from 1971-2020 (see page 2). These programs have all now been evaluated against the COMS standards and found comprehensive.

### ACVREP

The COMS program is administered by the Academy for the Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP) in the USA. The ACVREP Board is committed to making the COMS program internationally accessible and there have been representatives from Australia and New Zealand on the COMS Subject Matter Expert Committee. OMAA has worked with ACVREP to interpret the COMS Handbook and clarify eligibility requirements for applicants outside the USA and Canada, including those from Australia and New Zealand. The COMS handbook can be downloaded from <https://www.acvrep.org/certifications/coms>

### Applying for COMS

A COMS application is a three-stage process and there are fees for each stage:

#### **1. Eligibility application.**

Set up an account through the ACVREP website. A COMS applicant from Australia or New Zealand, with a non COMS recognised training pathway can apply through Category 2 Path B, submit evidence of O&M qualifications and workplace experience (see pages 3-4) and pay fees online. We can not apply through Category 1 if our training programs have not been formally assessed through the US-based National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (<https://www.naces.org/>). Contact ACVREP with any queries or concerns with applying for COMS, however, OMAA can support you with some areas, for example with the 13 Domains matrix, developed to support OMAA members to evidence their comprehensive O&M training and who to talk to at ACVREP.

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## 2. The COMS Exam.

Once eligibility is approved by ACVREP, the applicant can take the online COMS exam at a local venue, set up through ACVREP. OMAA is not involved in this process. Please contact ACVREP directly should any queries occur throughout the COMS process.

## 3. The COMS Certificate.

After passing the COMS exam, evidence of certification arrives in the mail. This evidence is needed to apply for OMAA Registration (ROMSA). Send a copy to OMAA. Remember to send your new information to OMAA once you recertify with ACVREP every 5 years to retain your ROMSA.

## O&M Personnel Preparation Programs in ANZ, 1971-2020

**NB: the information in the table following was gathered by PSC Chair 2020 as part of OMAA process, at the time, of support diverse training pathways in Australasia with ACVREP eligibility**

Victoria		
1971-1991	Royal Guide Dogs Associations of Australia (RGDAA), Kew VIC	Certificate / Graduate Diploma in O&M
1981-1983	Victoria College, Burwood VIC	Certificate in O&M
1985	Victoria College, Burwood VIC	Diploma in O&M
1985-1987	Victoria College, Burwood VIC	Bachelor of Arts (Disability Studies, O&M)
1992-1997	La Trobe University, VIC	Graduate Diploma in O&M
1998-2006	La Trobe University, VIC	Bachelor of Health Sciences (O&M) Graduate Diploma in O&M
2001-2006	Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB), VIC	Certificate IV in Vision Impairment Support (O&M)
2008-2011	La Trobe University, VIC	Graduate Diploma in O&M
2008-2010	Vision Australia, Kensington	Graduate Certificate in Vision Impairment (O&M)
2011-2013	Vision Australia, NSW/VIC	Graduate Certificate in Vision Impairment (O&M)
2014-2017	Vision Australia, VIC	Graduate Diploma of O&M
New South Wales		
1988-1996	Guide Dogs NSW/ACT	Agency certificate
1994	University of Western Sydney	Certificate in O&M; Grad Diploma in Special Ed (itinerant teachers)
1998-1999	University of Sydney	Graduate Diploma of Health Science (Vision Impairment)
2000-2018	Renwick Centre, University of Newcastle, NSW	Master of Special Education ( $\pm$ Sensory Impairment/Disability)
2018-2020	Renwick Centre/Macquarie University, NSW	Master of Disability Studies (Sensory Disability)
Queensland		
1998-2016	Griffith University, QLD	Master of Human Services (O&M)
South Australia		

2001	Flinders University, SA	Master of Special Education (O&M) Graduate Certificate in Education (O&M) Graduate Certificate in Disability Studies
New Zealand		
1990-2008	Massey University, NZ	Postgraduate Diploma in Rehabilitation (with Distinction in Rehabilitation of the Visually Impaired)
2016	University of Pittsburgh / Blind Foundation NZ	Vision Studies - Certificate in O&M
2018	Massey University, NZ/BLENNZ Apprenticeship with AER competencies (13 domains) completed or equivalent (2 years part time min)	Postgraduate Diploma in Specialist Teaching: Blind and Low Vision+ 2 short courses and 80+hours blindfold/simulator peer teaching (O&M; Life skills)
2020-2021	Blind Low Vision New Zealand / Careerforce, NZ	New Zealand Diploma in Vision Habilitation/Rehabilitation (Level 7)

## O&M Qualifications

A COMS application requires a bachelor's degree or higher, or a national government approved O&M personnel preparation program (e.g., Vocational Education and Training sector in Australia). Additionally, the OMAA recommends 80+ hours experience in community travel and activities of daily living with low vision/blindness to consolidate embodied O&M knowledge. The programs listed on page 2 have been reviewed by OMAA against the COMS body of knowledge and deemed comprehensive. Obviously over time this list has and will continue to evolve. OMAA will add further courses as requested and as applicants for membership from these courses are accepted by COMS.

Two kinds of evidence of qualifications are required for a COMS eligibility application:

### 1. *Transcript.*

An official university transcript (listing subjects and results) needs to show successful completion of a comprehensive O&M qualification at bachelor level or higher. The transcript can be sent electronically, directly from the university to ACVREP, OR a hard copy original with security features (watermark, logo, etc) can be scanned and uploaded with the COMS application, and then a certified hard copy posted to ACVREP in the mail.

If a university transcript is unavailable, then upload a university/college testamur (the wall certificate with university seal, received at graduation), then send a certified hard copy to ACVREP in the mail, OR send a signed letter, statement or certificate from the program provider on letterhead, declaring satisfactory completion of the program, AND/OR an unofficial transcript of subjects undertaken and results (e.g., semester print-out).

If the O&M qualification was less than bachelor's degree, then also submit evidence of a degree or highest qualification in another discipline (e.g., transcript or testamur).

### 2. *OMAA-branded core domain area chart.*

This document guides the COMS applicant to show that the O&M qualification has addressed all areas of the COMS body of knowledge. Graduates from an Australasian O&M

program (see page 2) can request the relevant OMAA-branded core domain area chart for their program from the OMAA Professional Standards Committee.

COMS applicants who trained outside Australia or New Zealand can contact ACVREP to review their program content, determine whether it is comprehensive, and then create a customized, OMAA-branded core domain area chart to support the COMS application.

The use of the OMAA core domains chart in the COMS process might identify gaps in the initial training program that need to be addressed before applying for COMS.

Sometimes the COMS body of knowledge has been pieced together from different training programs. An OMAA PSC member can support the process with guidance to allow an individual to evaluate evidence of sufficient training.

Contact [standards@omaaustralasia.com](mailto:standards@omaaustralasia.com) for more information.

## **Internship / Workplace Experience**

A COMS applicant needs to have completed at least 350 hours work placement/internship, supervised by a COMS. This COMS-supervised placement can be undertaken as part of an O&M qualification and/or after graduation as part of early employment.

At least 250 hours of the placement must be direct client work (e.g., planning, assessment, teaching, case conferences, file notes) rather than general O&M duties (e.g., driving, team meetings, professional development sessions).

The usual evidence for this requirement is a completed, COMS-signed Applied/Clinical Competency Evaluation Form (see COMS Handbook).

If the immediate supervisor is not a COMS, then arrangements can be made for an off-site COMS to oversee the placement, working in a three-way relationship with the COMS applicant and local non-COMS supervisor. Off-site COMS supervision needs to be approved by ACVREP before the placement commences – see the COMS Handbook for the application paperwork.

### **Alternatives to a COMS-supervised internship**

The ACVREP recognises that although O&M Specialists who qualified in Australasia before 2020 usually completed at least 350 hours internship, few were supervised by a COMS and do not have the required Applied/Clinical Competency Evaluation Form as evidence. Thus, alternative ways for experienced applicants to demonstrate workplace competence have been approved by ACVREP.

#### **1. Hours of experience.**

A form on letterhead (See COMS Handbook Appendix for template) signed by a workplace supervisor stating completion of 3200 hours professional practice in the most recent 3 years – this method suits recent graduates – OR a curriculum vitae showing at least 3 years of O&M employment, roles, responsibilities, and full-time equivalence – this method suits applicants who qualified more than three years ago and

#### **2. Quality of service.**

A signed letter of recommendation from a workplace supervisor (on letterhead) stating that the applicant satisfactorily implements the full body of knowledge in the workplace.

## COMS Exam

Once evidence of eligibility has been reviewed and approved by ACVREP, the applicant can apply for and take the online COMS exam at a local Kryterion exam centre, organised with ACVREP. The exam has questions assessing the COMS Body of Knowledge and Code of Ethics.

- The COMS Handbook gives information about the proportion of questions allocated to each domain in the Body of Knowledge.
- A COMS study guide is available for sale through ACVREP.
- There are practice questions in the Quizlet app.
- Consider joining up with a study buddy to prepare for the exam.
- An applicant finds out immediately whether he/she has passed the exam
- An applicant can have two attempts at the exam for one exam fee. Those who feel anxious about the exam can treat the first attempt as a trial run to see what it is like and either pass first time or find out the areas that need more study.