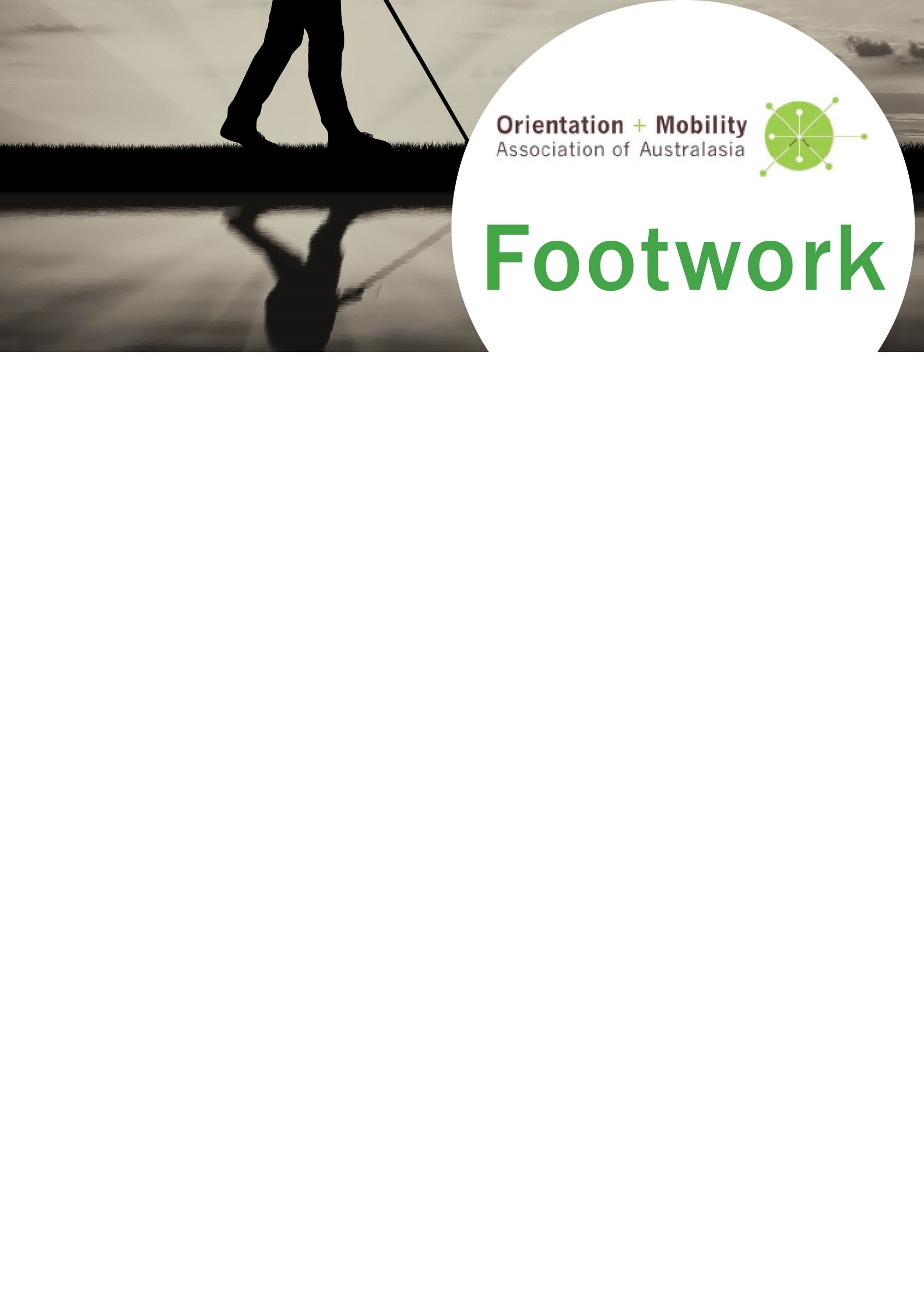
Foot



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Welcome to the first issue of *Footwork*, aiming to keep Orientation and Mobility (O&M) employers, employees, and other stakeholders informed of developments in the O&M Association of Australasia (OMAA).

## Professionalising O&M

Since the 1970s, O&M graduates in Australia and New Zealand have primarily been accountable to their employers while the professional body has provided informal collegial support. Until recently, there has been no particular incentive for O&M specialists to apply for certification. However, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in Australia has introduced a third voice, requesting that the OMAA (1) establish appropriate and sufficient governance of O&M standards, and (2) identify individual O&M specialists that meet the suitability requirements for NDIS service providers.

Establishment and governance of professional standards is the work of the professional body, not O&M employers. Towards this end, the OMAA has been collaborating with the NDIS, with ACVREP (the certification body in the USA) and members of education and other allied health professions. This process has identified many elements that the OMAA needs to address in professionalisation. Progress through these tasks is necessarily slow, requiring many volunteer hours. However, the NDIS has advised that the OMAA should work steadily through the process in a robust way, rather than attempting to devise quick-fix solutions to meet seemingly looming NDIS deadlines. The OMAA is keeping the NDIS appraised of our progress.

## Suitability requirements for NDIS service providers in Australia

The NDIS is currently allowing other professionals to sign off O&M submissions, but this is not a long-term solution and O&M certification has become imperative.

Soon, any professional offering O&M services under NDIS will need to (1) be a member of the OMAA, (2) have their qualifications and fitness to practice certified according to established standards, and (3) be publicly registered on the OMAA website.

O&M employers can support this process by:

* Notifying O&M employees who work with NDIS clients that they will be expected to join the OMAA and apply for certification through ACVREP when the international program for Certified O&M Specialists (COMS) goes live later this year (see below)
* Reflecting the difference between certified and uncertified employees in position descriptions and pay-scale
* Supporting employees who are unable to pay their COMS/OMAA fees in one go. Annual OMAA fees are currently only AUD$75, but the COMS fees are US$680 for a five year certification, and COMS recertification costs US$345 every five years. The OMAA is not advocating that employers pay these professional membership fees – this patriarchy fosters learned helplessness, and O&M professionals need to accept this financial responsibility. However, a fee-free COMS loan scheme for employees would be helpful as the COMS program is becoming established
* Collaborating with the OMAA to offer COMS information sessions for employees as the program goes live, booking an OMAA speaker who can offer accurate information, address questions and allay anxieties about the COMS application process. These sessions can be conducted in person, or via videoconference when O&M teams convene.
* Incorporating the COMS requirement into any new O&M positions advertised. For example, “COMS preferred. We will support non-certified applicants to apply for COMS within their first year of employment”
* Circulating *Footwork* to all O&M personnel, so that non-OMAA members are also receiving current, relevant information about COMS during this period of change

## International O&M standards and certification

The Australasian O&M profession is small, and it is not feasible to establish and maintain a credible, independently proctored certification program within the region. Therefore in 2013, the OMAA adopted the Certified O&M Specialist (COMS) program established by the Academy for the Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP) in the United States.

ACVREP’s online COMS exam provides a solid international benchmark for entry-level O&M professionals. To date, 13 O&M specialists from Australia and New Zealand have become COMS.

However, some applicants have found it difficult to meet the eligibility criteria for the COMS exam because of differences between US and Australasian O&M training pathways. The ACVREP Board has been responsive to this problem, consulting widely to seek solutions. The OMAA has been working to clarify local eligibility criteria for the COMS exam while educating the ACVREP about the Australian and New Zealand Qualifications Frameworks, O&M culture and service profiles in Australasia.

The OMAA has two representatives on the COMS Subject Matter Expert Committee: Lil Deverell (Australia) and Nancy Higgins (NZ). The SME committee undertakes a full review of standards and the COMS exam in a five year cycle, soon to start again, and is working to reduce US bias in the exam.

The ACVREP Board has built OMAA feedback into a review of their existing COMS program. It seems that, rather than the OMAA needing to develop a separate COMS program for Australasia, the ACVREP is proposing a revised pathway to the existing COMS program for any international (non-US) applicants. This is exciting news.

The COMS SME Committee reconvenes on 4 May, at which time we will learn more about the new COMS pathway and Nancy and Lil will be better equipped to answer questions. It will inevitably take several months to iron out the wrinkles, but it seems possible that the COMS program will go live for Australasian applicants this year.

O&M employers have done an amazing job of establishing and nurturing the O&M profession to date. Now the OMAA can share some of this responsibility. The OMAA welcomes opportunities to collaborate with O&M employers and other stakeholders as we work to position the O&M profession firmly amidst the education, allied health, disability and access sectors.

You are welcome to circulate *Footwork* to anyone who might be interested. If you have queries about the work of OMAA, or would like to subscribe or unsubscribe to *Footwork*, please contact the [omaasecretary@gmail.com](mailto:omaasecretary@gmail.com)

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