

## Understanding the impact of the new occupational therapy competencies on the national exam and program accreditation

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The newly released [Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada](#) has been the result of years of work by the CORECOM-CANCOM project. The project created a single competency document that will outline entry to practice competencies and describe competencies used throughout occupational therapy practice. Practicing occupational therapists will likely have learned about the new competencies through their respective provincial regulatory organizations.

The project was governed by a Tripartite Steering Committee with representatives from the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations (ACOTRO), the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT), and the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy University Programs (ACOTUP). Additional background information about the CORECOM-CANCOM project is located on the websites of provincial regulators in Canada. The project is funded, in part, by the Government of Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition Program.

It is anticipated that the competencies will be used for teaching entry to practice occupational therapists, examining with the National Occupational Therapy Certification Exam (NOTCE), and determining continuing competency of licensed professionals. The regulatory organizations, university programs, and CAOT will be working closely together to ensure the exam and accreditation reflect the new competencies and that the timing of these expectations is in alignment.

Currently, the competency document used for the exam and accreditation of entry to practice programs is the 2012 [Profile of Practice of Occupational Therapists in Canada](#).

### Occupational therapy educational accreditation

Students will need to be taught the competencies outlined in the new competency document. To ensure that students receive a comprehensive education, occupational therapy entry to practice programs are

accredited through the CAOT accreditation program. [Accreditation of professional education programs](#) is a “process of quality assurance through which accredited status is granted to a program of study once it has met certain standards of education established by the responsible authorities”. All occupational therapy programs in Canada are [accredited at present](#). Currently, accreditation requires programs to demonstrate that they are teaching entry to practice competencies by mapping them to their curriculum and fieldwork programs ([Standard 8.3](#)). They are required to map to both the 2012 [Profile of Practice](#) and the provincial competency document required by the regulator in that province.

To implement the new competency framework, the accreditation decision-making body (Academic Credentialing Council) will meet and determine which currently required standards need to be revised and how they will be revised to include the new competencies contained in the new *Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada* document.

Programs are accredited every seven years. The expectation for adherence to a new standard will also require discussion to enable programs sufficient time to implement a revised accreditation standard and submit documentation to demonstrate it has been met.

### Occupational therapist assistant educational accreditation

Similarly, entry to practice occupational therapist assistant (OTA) and physiotherapist assistant (PTA) programs are accredited according to defined standards. The standards for OTA accreditation are governed through a program for OTA and PTA accreditation called the Occupational Therapist Assistant and Physiotherapist Assistant Education Accreditation Program ([OTA & PTA EAP](#)). This program is governed jointly between CAOT and Physiotherapy Education Accreditation Canada. The standards are set out in its [Accreditation Standards](#) document. Programs are required to map their curriculum and submit evidence that they meet competencies set out in Standard 6. The

competencies listed in Standard 6 are the same as the competencies in the 2018 *Practice Profile for Occupational Therapist Assistants*.

Meetings will be required among CAOT board members and OTA & PTA EAP stakeholders to determine how the new competency document will affect the *Practice Profile for Occupational Therapist Assistants* as well as OTA accreditation. From these meetings will stem a process to further progress with ensuring a high standard of OTA education and determine who would undertake further work.

### National occupational therapy exam

Exam content for all high-stakes entry to practice exams is guided by a blueprint. The [exam blueprint](#) defines the exam by outlining what percentage of the exam is allotted to each competency. Currently, the blueprint for the exam is based on the 2012 *Profile of Practice of Occupational Therapists in Canada*.

SIX DOMAINS	SIX DOMAINES
Occupational Therapy Expertise	L'expertise en ergothérapie
Communication and Collaboration	La communication et la collaboration
Culture, Equity, and Justice	La culture, l'équité et la justice
Excellence in Practice	L'excellence dans la pratique
Professional Responsibility	La responsabilité professionnelle
Engagement with the Profession	L'engagement avec la profession

Figure 1: *Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada (2021)*.

The CAOT Board has agreed, as part of the CORECOM-CANCOM project outcomes, to integrate the new *Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada* into the NOTCE blueprint. Given that students need to be educated with the new competency document prior to being examined on it, the implementation of an updated blueprint is at least two or three years away, if not more. Coordination with ACOTUP university programs will be important for establishing the implementation timeline.

To begin, the NOTCE exam program is planning the steps for integrating the new competency document. First, discussions with working groups are required to ensure broad stakeholder input, to examine best practices in redesigning a blueprint, and determine supporting methodology, such as a survey of practitioners and expert panel review. Funds have been

set aside for a professional psychometrist to provide input on best practices in blueprint methodology. We will need to ensure diverse voices are involved in reflecting on and validating the updated blueprint, including selecting types of exam items, delineating the entry to practice level, and determining percentages of items allocated to each competency. Consideration of the timing of a new guiding textbook to replace the 2013 second edition of *Enabling Occupation II* (Townsend & Polatakjo, 2013) will also be paramount at this juncture. A report describing the method and outcomes of this blueprint project will be submitted by the psychometric consultant. The new blueprint will be widely available on the [NOTCE website](#) as part of an updated exam resource manual.

Following approval of a redesigned exam blueprint, all the exam items that are held in our secure “item bank” will need to be reviewed. Each item will be analyzed for whether it remains current and which area of the new blueprint it is examining. This process is called “coding” and we may need to select occupational therapist item writers to assist in this process. We have more than 1,000 items to code in our item bank and anticipate this work will be done by groups of trained volunteers, with the NOTCE staff and committees providing as much support as needed. When all items have been coded and mapped against the new blueprint, we will then be able to generate a report that identifies gaps in our item bank—in other words, in which areas do we not have enough items to create several unique exams.

Then begins the task of writing new exam items to fill any gaps. We will put out a call for item writers and ask for people to self-identify whether they can help write items in the areas in which we have gaps. We have an item writing coordinator who helps train item writers and leads them through the process of drafting items according to plain language rules and requirements for clarity and structure. Groups of writers work together to review and hone the items before they are finally sent to the Certification Exam Committee for review. As with previous item writing workshops, item writers will be required to sign a contract for confidentiality and will be paid a stipend depending on the number of items we need. At this point, it is hard to predict how many and what types of items we will need because of the potential overlap between the old blueprint areas and new the competencies. For example, items coded for “Enabling Occupation: Initiate” in the old blueprint may code directly to a competency in the new blueprint. However, not all may directly map to one another, thus requiring new item generation. This work will be added to the normal work of item bank maintenance, as items in the item bank are constantly reviewed and updated by the Certification Exam Committee.

Additionally, the exam study resources will need new items. Exam candidates need to be able to study and understand how the new competencies will be reflected in the exam. These resources will be made available prior to any exam that follows a new blueprint. The first exam to follow the new blueprint has not yet been determined, and this decision will be made by the exam committee in consultation with academic and regulatory stakeholders.

### **Please be involved!**

Please pay attention to your regulatory body updates and CAOT's weekly emails for opportunities to be

involved in the work discussed above. We will be seeking particular clinical experiences and occupational therapists who identify as members of particular communities such as LGBTQ+, Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Colour. We welcome any comment and suggestions you have about the process laid out here. Please email Alison Douglas, director of standards, with your thoughts at: [adouglas@caot.ca](mailto:adouglas@caot.ca)

### **References**

Townsend, E. A., & Polatajko, H. J. (2013). *Enabling occupation II: Advancing an occupational therapy vision for health, well-being, & justice through occupation*. CAOT Publications ACE.

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