

IPA Certificate of Proficiency in the Phonetics of English **Examinations Report 2015-2019**

In my previous report, I raised four points. In this present report, I plan to revisit and update three of them:

Examination entry numbers and fees

Developments

The future of the *Certificate*

I will conclude by revisiting one further point that I have made previously and which, to my mind, still remains unanswered. This report is updated from the brief verbal report given at the AGM in Melbourne. It now also includes data from the examination which ran in September 2019 and compares numbers with a similarly updated data set from 2012 to 2015. (August/September figures are never available at the time of the AGM.)

- **Examination entry numbers and fees**

- o Numbers

The decline reported in Glasgow in 2015 has accelerated. In this present four-year period there have been only three occasions out of eight on which there has been a sufficient number of candidates to enable the exam to run (August/September of 2017, 2018 and 2019). In the period 2012-2015, the examination ran on five occasions out of eight.

In total, just 20 candidates entered and sat the examination (compared with a final total of 39 in the previous four years). However, only 8 Certificates were awarded. The failure rate in this period was 60% (12 out of 20 entrants failing). This has increased from overall 54% in the 2012-2015 period (21 out of 39 entrants failing). These very high fail rates are, I believe, a direct consequence of the fact that traditional practical phonetics is no longer widely taught. People enter with literally no idea of the sounds of the International Phonetic Alphabet; they have neither the ability to recognise them nor the ability to produce them. We have had comments such as “I only do the English; all this other stuff has nothing to do with me.” One person even asked for “the English version, please” when confronted with reading IPA symbols in the oral! The updated webpage is very clear about what is expected. Very often, candidates appear not even to have looked at this.

Although we hoped that offering the examination twice a year would boost uptake, this has not happened. However, the August/September date which I introduced in 2004 to follow the dedicated practical training strand on the UCL Summer Course in English Phonetics is still the most popular, in spite of the fact that that training strand no longer attracts sufficient applicants to run.

- o Fees

The entry fee continues to increase each year, reflecting increased prices, and currently stands at £150 (with half-price for IPA members). The fee enables the Association to more or less break even on paying the examiners, but it does not generate income.

However, as of this year and for the first time in its history, we no longer had open access to accommodation for the examination at UCL and it was anticipated that each examination would therefore start to cost the Association several hundreds of pounds in accommodation hire costs. Fortunately, however, my personal connection with the University of Westminster enabled me to arrange accommodation there that we did not have to pay for. However, it is my own view that unless we have free accommodation, running the examination will not be sustainable in the long term.

The idea of moving the examination out of London in search of different accommodation also seems to be unpopular. The centrality of a London venue remains attractive to candidates some of whom travel specifically to UK in order to take the examination.

- **Developments**

- o The examination webpage

This now contains a lot of information about the examination with advice on answering the written paper and plenty of examples of practical exercises. I have not, however, added recorded materials such as English dictations and nonsense words.

This somewhat enhanced webpage does not, however, seem to have had the hoped-for effect of improving performance. This is disappointing. Often candidates have not even visited the website, even when advised to do so. Nearly all candidates today are self-taught and they therefore enter the examination unaware of what is required of them.

- o Reading from transcription

Since the start, this test has involved reading a substantial prose passage. It is my opinion that this is no longer appropriate. Even in pure pronunciation classes, it is no longer fashionable to read narrative passages of transcribed prose.

However, even with online pronouncing dictionaries accompanied by audio files, the ability to read from transcription remains an important skill. Accordingly, from 2020, this test will be replaced with reading entries from pronouncing dictionaries. Items chosen will include variant pronunciations and the differences will prompt the short

theory question with which examiners follow this performance. Sample materials will be uploaded to the site in the new year, in plenty of time for the first 2020 examination. Candidates will not be given preparation time, but will read these entries from sight in the same way as they read exotic (that is, non-English) symbols from the IPA chart.

o Phonetics education

Self-taught students in particular, will benefit from the latest website development by the IPA Council's Education Committee which has added a webpage to the IPA site listing links to phonetics resources, online courses and tutorial materials.

- **The future of the *Certificate* examination**

Since taking over as Examinations Secretary in 2001, every four years I have given some thought to the way forward. There had earlier been thoughts of discontinuing the award. I was very opposed to that. For some years, the examination received a massive boost from the UCL Summer Course in English Phonetics which ran a dedicated, practically focused IPA exam strand. But numbers enrolling on this course also dwindled, either because of cost or because the *Certificate* is no longer seen as relevant. This year, 2019, it was no longer offered.

Believing, as I do, in the intrinsic value of the practical skills of the phonetician, I am reluctant in the extreme to countenance an exam that does not test listening and production skills. This, to my mind, would not be a proper phonetics qualification. While logistically it would enable an opening up of the examination to other centres around the world, without the practical assessments, it would simply replicate the more theoretically focused examinations that already exist in degree and diploma courses; it would certify knowledge about speech, but it would not identify the holder as a competent and skilled phonetician.

I propose, therefore, to try for the next four-year period with the new Reading from Transcription test, and also to introduce an early-bird registration at a reduced fee. If this still fails to attract candidates, then I think the time may have come to consider that the *Certificate* has outlived its usefulness.

I receive enquiries now from people who ask me what they can do with the qualification... this also suggests that maybe it has run its day. Clearly, a decision one way or the other will have to be made. Evidence from 2019 till 2023 will facilitate this.

- **The Status of the so-called Examinations Secretary**

Finally, I repeat a point that I have made twice previously. It is the case that the Examinations Secretary, so-called, is not officer of the Association and need not even be a member of Council. This does not seem right. I understand that there are other tasks which people perform that do not give them Executive status, but I feel that the Examinations Secretary (a name which is itself now outmoded, and maybe this person

would be better called simply Examiner or better Chief Examiner given that more than one examiner is now always involved in conducting an examination; this would overcome today's more administrative and clerical connotations of 'secretary') should at the very least be a member of Council.

If, therefore, at the time of appointment, the Examiner is not already an elected member of Council, they should be co-opted. To have an Examiner who is not a member of council gives the wrong message to the public at large: "the exam is insignificant to the extent that any phonetically qualified individual can do the job; we don't really mind about the examination and the award accruing from it - they are not central to our concerns." I believe this an unfortunate impression and I ask again that if the Examiner is not already a member of Council when appointed, they should be co-opted to the Council. The statutes of the Association currently make no provision for this and should be amended accordingly

The present position also fails to give recognition to the responsibilities attached to the role of the Examiner. The role depends entirely on the interest, motivation and good will of an individual. Without Council membership of the Examiner, the examination and the award it conveys seem belittled, peripheral rather than central to the Association's business and of little concern. It seems to be to be entirely inappropriate for management of a professional qualification (albeit a low-level qualification) to be effectively the hobby of an individual. This would not happen in any other professional field.

Accordingly, I propose:

- 1) that the Examinations Secretary should be known henceforth as the Chief Examiner
- 2) that any future Chief Examiner, if not already an elected member of Council, should be co-opted to Council.

I ask the newly elected Executive (The President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer) to consider these proposals.

Patricia Ashby
Melbourne, August 2019