The Royal Opening of a New Building

A Case Study of a Royal Visit to a New Building

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“Your Majesty: you do us a very great honour by your presence today to open our new campus.”

With these simple, but eloquent words, the principal of Queen Margaret University, Anthony Cohen, CBE welcomed Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth to the first complete university campus completed in Scotland in more than a generation.

Minutes before the Queen arrived, Lynne Russell, the press and public relations officer of Queen Margaret University was suddenly directed by the press officer of Buckingham Palace to leave her critical post of welcoming and briefing the arriving members of the media and conduct a last minute tour for the Queen’s official photographer. The press officer stated that Russell needed to orientate him to see the photo opportunities for the event. As soon as Russell left her post, Sarah Whigham, the overall planner for the event, noticed that there was no one to greet and orient the arriving media. At this crucial moment and with only minutes to spare before Her Majesty the Queen would arrive, Whigham knew she needed to act quickly and calmly to restore order and keep the event on time, on track and on message. And that is exactly what transpired on this historic day.

Queen Margaret University has a much revered and celebrated history. The university is named in honour of Queen Margaret, the early and legendary eleventh century Queen of Scotland who was later canonized as Saint Margaret. The university named in her honour, was officially founded by two women in 1875 as the Edinburgh School of Cookery and Domestic Economy and today offers undergraduate and post graduate degrees to 5000 students. Although it is actually the smallest University in Scotland, through educational partnerships from India to Singapore and Switzerland, it has a truly global reach.

The University had been located for decades in an urban university setting in the far western part of Edinburgh. However, in(get date), the University decided to consolidate all of its programmes in one purpose built campus in the south east part of Edinburgh in a community called Musselburgh. Through many years of planning and two years of construction, the campus finally opened in September of 2007. As is typical of extreme organization change, the members of the university community faced many daunting challenges as they inhabited a very new type of campus.

Major challenges included delays in the completion of construction for key areas including the student union. However, one of the most critical challenges was a cultural one. The faculty had previously had offices that were shared by one or two other persons. The new campus offered an open space plan and this created many new problems as the staff learned to work together in this new environment for the first time.
Only six months after the new campus had been opened for use by students and staff, an invitation was extended to Buckingham Palace. And less than one year after the campus had been inhabited, Her Majesty the Queen would arrive.

The Queen accepted the invitation that was extended six months prior by the University to open its new campus in Edinburgh, Scotland. Principal Cohen first extended the proposal to invite the Queen to the Lord Lieutenant of East Lothian where Queen Margaret University is located. The Lord Lieutenant, Sir Garth Morrison reviewed the proposal and decided affirmatively to send an official invitation to Buckingham Palace on behalf of the University. Although this communication appears to be straightforward, it was to be the last time during this event where communication with Buckingham Palace would be this direct.

The Queen Margaret University event planner, Sarah Whigham had been a member of the University staff for less than one year when she was given the assignment to plan an event fit for a Queen. Whigham had previously worked for Harvey Nichols department store in Edinburgh in special events and had organized the opening of the store as well as additional events in the retail sector.

During her brief tenure with Queen Margaret University she had been responsible for organizing receptions and a community open day, but the visit of Queen Elizabeth would be a major test of her abilities to bring together diverse groups of stakeholders to showcase the University in a positive way to a broader public. According to Sarah:

“Although it was very stressful due to the presence of Her Majesty the Queen, everything went to plan. As a team we all pulled together very well. That is the real success, our ability to work effectively as a team”.

The planning for this event began in earnest three months before the royal visit with a meeting of twelve key stakeholders at Queen Margaret University. Attending the meeting were representatives from the university, Buckingham Palace and the East Lothian and Borders Police department who would provide protection for the Queen. After a brief introduction by each of the stakeholders the university officials conducted a tour of the campus and suggested various locations that the Queen could visit during the event. These locations were later amended by representatives from Buckingham Palace and finalized several weeks prior to the visit.

The planning for the event continued with a series of checklists and task lists developed by the university’s director of marketing and communications Jane Scott. Whigham stated that “there a lot of meetings with Jane as well as others to develop and finalize the task list”. Included in the overall task list were various departments of the university including the library, the student union, marketing and public relations, facility management and other critical stakeholders.

Debra Turner, facility manager of the new campus recalls that most of the meetings were face to face rather than through the use of email. Turner states that “Sarah prefers face to face communication and I think you accomplish more this way and it builds confidence”.

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However, according to Sarah Whigham and others, external communications with Buckingham Palace were difficult from the very beginning of the event planning process. Lynne Russell, Press and Publications Officer was not satisfied with the communication from the Royal Press Officer from Buckingham Palace. Russell states that:

“I do not think the Royal Press Officer was one hundred percent clear in communicating what role they would play leading up to and during the event. We were told to follow the lead of the Royal Press Office but we did not receive any clear direction. The Royal Press Officer did not respond very quickly”.

Because the stakeholders could not communicate directly with Buckingham Palace to seek answers to key questions such as protocol requirements for hosting the Queen, Whigham decided to contact the Edinburgh Royal Botanical Gardens where the Queen had visited numerous times. Whigham was very impressed with the information she received from Allan Bennell at the Royal Botanic Gardens and states that “he was fantastic and gave us planning documents, told us what to expect, told us what security would be required and other things and this is what I based most of our planning on”.

The only question that Whigham and her team could not get answered was how close the cameras could be positioned to the queen. She needed to know this prior to the event but states that “The Royal Officer repeatedly said, wait until we get to the day and I will sort this out. However for us that was too late, we needed answers then”. Not having this information did prove problematic for Queen Margaret’s photographer as on the day, he had to make a very quick decision to reposition himself as he could not get a good shot of the Queen shaking hands with the line up of selected people. His quick thinking made sure that he got the shots he wanted.

Another issue that the team had to overcome was a change in the platform. Whigham did not know that the University had someone in house who could create a platform for them. Scott Anderson of the School of Drama and Creative Industries offered to help build the platform and a backdrop. Whigham thought the width was fine because the palace gave her no guidance as to how close the principal could stand to the Queen. One week before the event, the Royal Press Officer saw the podium and said, “Oh no, she will not do this.” She further explained that after unveiling the plaque the Queen would stand back and read it and this could cause difficulty because it was so narrow. Russell states that “up until this point we did not realize she would do this and would be available for pictures with the plaque.” Whigham then checked with Health and Safety and because of the narrowness of the corridor could not extend the width of the platform. So, they had to eliminate the platform at the last minute. Whigham states that “we used Jane Scott as a stand in for the Queen because they are the same height. The chord was long enough for her to reach it without the platform”.

Having overcome the issue of the platform the next challenge was the tassel. The University had curtains made from the official Queen Margaret University tartan pattern. The Queen was to open the curtains to reveal the plaque signifying that she had officially opened the campus. The chords that were provided were dull and Whigham decided they needed tassels. Joanna Thompson, a member of the
marketing department went and bought tassels and tied them on. The day before, Whigham and her team did a walk through and Rosalyn Marshall, the Vice Principal, thought they needed a bit of tidying up so Jill Kelly in Estates and Facilities offered to stitch them. On the morning of the event Jill was frantically sewing them into place. Whigham recalls:

“I suppose I did not pull hard enough when I tested them the morning of the event. The Principal was most concerned that the curtains worked. When the Queen tugged on the chord the tassel came off in her hand. However, she was great and she simply placed the tassel beside her”.

The budget categories for the event included the plaque, curtain, printing the brochure, flowers, flags and poles. Also, the cost of preparing meals off campus for the Italian students who were not able to have their usual meal on campus was a key consideration. Whigham felt that budget constraints influenced decisions regarding the number of people invited to celebrate in the event. If there was one thing she could change it would have been this. She would have liked to have been able to invite more people. Haston feels that if you just consider the fifty minutes the Queen was here, then the event may not have necessarily been value for money, but feels “the legacy from the event definitely has greater value”.

With regards to risk management, Whigham and her team felt that the police and protection officers were very laid back. The team told them what they needed. Every area had to be covered from manhole covers to mail boxes and waste bins. The roof, the lockers, all of these areas had to be secured. The main protection officer was Scott Grahame and he and Turner worked together. They had two secured rooms and secured toilets. In the event of an incident that required an evacuation they had to get the quickest and fastest route out of the building. So, that was their major concern. Turner states that:

“If Scott looked at me and asked “Quickest route Debbie?” I had to be ready with an answer. I became a master of knowing the location of every fire exit in the building. Scott, said, “Debbie, I trust you.” We had a very good rapport”.

However Turner and Grahame were not the only people with a good rapport. All of the team worked very well together and were impressed at how Whigham managed the whole event. Haston felt that the most enjoyable part of the event was “working with Sarah because she was so well organized, she was a major asset. Russell comments that “I was impressed with how calm and courteous she was on the day of the event despite the enormous pressure she was under”, and Turner was impressed with her “organization ability”.

Despite the problems with external communications, due to the strong internal communications ability of the Queen Margaret University team, the event was a triumphant. According to the university press office, “News coverage was positive and strong with major stories in local newspapers and on television. There definitely was a spike in coverage during the period immediately following the event.” However, the greater outcome was the return on the objectives that was set by the planning team. As a result of
the event, the team and the university experienced a successful outcome that was far greater than the
construction and habitation of the new campus.

They had learned to work together effectively and demonstrated that could overcome the most difficult
challenges with the calm and experienced leadership of their professional event planner and the
commitment of the entire team. It was an event not only fit for a Queen but one that would also make
Saint Margaret proud as well.

**How Can the Queen and Her Event Planner Communicate Even Better in the Future?**

Five authorities in planned events offer expert advice beginning on the next page.

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**Text to come**

Lady Elizabeth Anson,
Founder, Party Planners
London, England
First cousin to Her Majesty the Queen

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Ellis Courtney
Director of Ceremonies
University of British Columbia
Former President, North American Association of Commencement Officers
Vancouver, British Columbia

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Linda Faulkner
Former U.S. White House Social Secretary
President and Mrs. Ronald Reagan

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“When planning an event of this magnitude and importance, it’s crucial that you utilize as many contacts
as possible and the University team did well to contact the Botanic Gardens as they’d experienced a
Royal visit but, the team also missed a trick. They could have also sought the help of the protocol
department within the Scottish Government who handle Royal visits for Government. They could have
facilitated a run through for the University team in advance of the event, thereby highlighting any
problems which would need addressed before the Royal visit took place.”
That being said, it’s almost impossible to predict what last minute changes will be required with a Royal visit, but the almost laid back manner of the Royal press office only added to an already demanding and stressful situation. However, as with all these things, all the hard work and hassle paid off and the visit was a huge success, thanks mainly to the flexibility and hard work of the University team.

*I suppose the things to keep in mind in these situations are to stand your ground, be firm but respectful and above all, remember that it is who you know in this business that counts. Contacts are everything.*

Joan Serafini,  
Private Secretary to Two First Ministers  
Scottish Government  
Managing Director, Equator Events Management  
Edinburgh, Scotland

“Advance teams who manage the visits of heads of state and other dignitaries must balance an enormous volume of appearances, each of which are unique in many areas of detail. As they know that event details change often, they tend to turn their attention to reviewing plans for each appearance relatively late in the process, after plans have approached their final state. This is problematic for the host organizers, who know that any changes the Advance Team requires may result in profound alterations to the set, schedule, and logistical plan. Working within late timeframes also maintains a higher level of security, with a less time for details on the movement and appearance of the dignitary to fall into questionable hands. There is truly no incentive for the advance team to collaborate any earlier, and this level of inconvenience for the event organizer is simply “a given” that must be expected and tolerated when hosting a major international personality. The event planner, in this case, maintained exceptional internal communication and organization. She established an environment in which everyone associated with the event felt confident in their preparations so the late changes from the Queen’s Advance Team could be handled efficiently effectively, and in a positive spirit of teamwork.”

Frank Supovitz  
Senior Vice President for Events  
National Football League

*Internal and external communications is a major factor in any event, regardless of size. When communication with the dignitary is out of the question, and the person or office designated to communicate requirements is not providing timely and critical information, finding an alternate source is the next best plan of action.*

Sarah Whigham and her team were spot on when it was decided that they would rely on colleagues from the Edinburgh Royal Botanical Gardens for assistance. When working with someone new, it’s always
best to find one or more colleagues who are experienced in dealing with your honoured guest. They may not be able to provide the details for your particular event, but they can provide many insights about the way your special VIP likes to be prepared and handled.

When certain details cannot be assessed well in advance, having multiple scenarios in place helps prevent too much last minute rushing around and creates a feeling that the event planner “knew all along” just what would be required.

Melissa Werner, MEd
Director of University Ceremonies and Secretary of the University
Co-founder, North American Association of Commencement Officers
Arizona State University, USA

Case study methodology

This case study was conducted through ethnographic research during the event itself and through a post event focus panel comprised of key stakeholders from Queen Margaret University.

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