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Partnerships that work for don

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PROFESSOR Kumar Bhattacharyya likes to tell his audience that Warwick University gave him "two chairs, an empty room and no money" when it asked him to start a manufacturing group in partnership with relevant industries in 1971.

The Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG) now trains annually some 3,800 managers and develops specific strategies for their companies' growth.

Students from Malaysia form Warwick University's largest group of foreign students at 327.

WMG, headed by Bhattacharyya, hires some 400 industry-experienced people, paying them industry-matching salaries. WMG commands a STG25 million annual turnover.

It has carried out research on industrial development with 300 companies worldwide, including Rolls Royce and British Aerospace.

Car-maker Rover Group alone deploys some 100 staff at WMG, looking into faster production means and some ground-breaking inventions.

Said Tan Strachan, director of corporate communications at Rover Group, "Development of `K' series engines were partially done at Warwick University. Needless to say, the university students benefited from the partnership."

Born in India where he passed his first degree, Bhattacharyya advised the then British Prime Minister Margaret (now Baroness) Thatcher on how to turn around Britain's battered manufacturing sector.

(The Economist said it was on the insistence of Thatcher that Bhattacharyya became a British citizen, "so that he could get security clearance to deal with the defence industry.")

When WMG got started, Bhattacharyya said, there was a "political willingness for a change" amid criticisms that he was diluting "academic purity".

Many British companies were supportive, their chairmen sitting in a steering committee with him to explore ways to increase competitiveness in the manufacturing industry.

In recent times, he was in John Major's delegation on a visit to India, where both Indian and British Prime Ministers were at the opening of WMG's latest overseas centre in Calcutta.

The university, established in 1964, had done well, rising to number six in the "league table" of 101 universities, and the 56-year-old professor ("I'm still very young") remains a natural attraction to the media.

Recently, Bhattacharyya walked into one of its impressive meeting rooms at the International Manufacturing Centre for his appointment with Malaysian reporters precisely at 11am as promised.

"Okay, John (John Read, the university director of public affairs, who was still briefing the reporters). I don't have much time, I want to talk about Malaysia," he said.

Bhattacharyya is a frequent visitor to Malaysia and is an avowed admirer of the country's economy.

"You (Malaysia) have reached a stage where you are powerful. Look at the companies you are buying," he told the reporters.

He is amazed by the growth of manufacturing in Malaysia.

"Look at the supply base of the automotive industry," he said.

His next visit to Malaysia?

"I'm going in March, April and will address a seminar in Kuala Lumpur in

May." Which is, of course, one visit a month.

As a regular in Kuala Lumpur, Bhattacharyya said he has been able to witness changes taking place.

"When I first arrived in Kuala Lumpur in the early 80s, Shangri-La was the sole five-star hotel. Now you have the luxury of various five-star hotels," said Bhattacharyya, who seems full of vigour.

His most significant link with Kuala Lumpur is that it is home to one of WMG's satellite operations - a partnership with University Teknologi Malaysia.

"It started at the CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) in Kuala Lumpur," he said.

Bhattacharyya explained that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad asked his then British counterpart, Thatcher, whether a clone of the WMG could be set up in Malaysia.

Soon the Business and Technology Centre (BTC) in Kuala Lumpur materialised, supervised by a senior committee headed by former Chief Secretary to the Government and Employees Provident Fund executive chairman Tan Sri Salehuddin Mohamad. Bhattacharyya also sits on the committee.

BTC conducts a hands-on engineering business programme, post-graduate and management studies, and carries out research into areas such as efficiency of manufacturing and development of new products like composites in the aerospace industry.

Staff from WMG are stationed in Kuala Lumpur, while personnel from BTC are in Warwick.

"Many Malaysians come here. Omar (Tan Sri Dr Omar Abdul Rahman, the science adviser to the Prime Minister) is a frequent visitor."

Bhattacharyya said WMG personnel fly to Kuala Lumpur every week.

"You can't teach somebody surgery by distance learning and video... these people are fast-track managers who, unlike university students, want immediate results."

Similar centres have been started in Penang and Perak and the target is to have 500 post-graduate students region-wide by the 2000.

Bhattacharyya's affection for Malaysia seems boundless.

"You will probably become a developed nation before 2020," he said.

On the importance of the services sector in modern economies, he asked: "Name any country where the services sector has kept its economy stable."

Before any of us could answer, he fired: "You can't name it."

"Every country," he added, "must have a strong manufacturing base to create employment."

Management gurus came in for roasting when the subject cropped up.

"The majority of management gurus never work. They study history and write books.

"Our approach is hands-on and not preaching from the pedestal. Management gurus are on their own, I have to feed my staff."

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