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WMG gets Jaguar purring

Founder of university-based research unit that's revitalising the luxury car maker talks to **Graham Ruddick**

It has been identified as a "future role model" for universities by Germany, the heartland of European manufacturing. Inside one room, a man wearing 3D glasses is gliding across the floor in front of a screen – he is designing the interior of a new car from its passenger seat.

Next door sits a de-wheeled 1980s car, which is being used to develop engine sounds for electric cars. A building across the road – known as the International Automotive Research Centre – holds one of the world's only Vehicle Energy Facilities. Behind its imposing steel doors and power generators, a wired-up car engine and battery is going through a week-long test of its durability and emissions as workers attempt to develop next-generation low-carbon vehicles.

This may sound like the Chinese government's latest attempt to dominate global manufacturing, but instead it is at the University of Warwick.

This is WMG – a training ground for Britain's future industrialists and Jaguar Land Rover's dream factory.

WMG, formerly Warwick Manufacturing Group, was founded in 1980 by Kumar Bhattacharyya, now Lord Bhattacharyya.

Born in Dhaka, he arrived in the UK for a Lucas apprenticeship in the 1970s. "Our cars were all British when I was young and I thought Britain was the only nation in the world that did anything. I was so shocked when I came here, so terribly shocked," he explains.

The well-travelled and well-connected Lord Bhattacharyya saw a country whose manufacturing was under pressure from complacent management and ruthless

efficiency in Germany and the Far East.

His prescription was to boost Britain's skill base through a closer combination of universities and industry, a powerful partnership of academic "rigour" and industry "relevance".

"In applied science and engineering, what is the point in doing research if you don't get any immediate economic impact? What is the point? People will say the benefits will come in 10-15 years. Well, the earth will be flat in 10-15 years. If you don't have that

[impact] then it is a waste of money," Lord Bhattacharyya adds.

He proposed that a university would train up graduates, with industrial companies paying for salaries, equipment and research. It was met with a down-the-nose rejection by many universities but up-and-coming Warwick saw potential in the idea.

Today, WMG has over 450 staff, 4,000 students in postgraduate education and an annual research budget of more than £120m.

WMG has struck partnerships with companies such as BAE Systems, Network Rail, AstraZeneca and Persimmon.

However, its most high-profile alliance is with Jaguar Land Rover and parent company Tata Motors. Tata Motors has 240 workers on site through its European Technical Centre, with more to come, while JLR has 170.

Three years after Tata Motors bought JLR, the luxury British car maker is booming. Annual profits are set to clear £1bn this year and the company is planning to build a new engine plant to keep up with surging demand for its products in Asia.

The sense of the luxury car maker's progress is particularly palpable at WMG, where JLR has moved its advanced research and development base.

WMG is where JLR is working on low-carbon vehicles and ideas that will drive the company forward within the next four to seven years. It has already produced JLR's world-leading development of aluminium bodies and

Jaguar's gas-turbine powered electric supercar, unveiled as a concept at the Paris motor show last year to gasps from the crowd.

"Some of the new models and the technology they are developing is unbelievable," says Lord Bhattacharyya.

The team at WMG is led by Tony Harper, head of research and advanced system engineering at JLR. "One of the reasons we are at WMG is that we have a saying at Jaguar Land Rover – not all the clever people work for us," he explains.



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Harper is playing a central role in an R&D programme, alongside 4,000 engineers at JLR bases at Gaydon and Whitley, in which the company will invest £750m this year.

Ideas being developed at WMG include aluminium alloys, controls for hybrid cars, battery technology and advanced entertainment systems, which, according to Harper, involve turning a car into a "giant iPad" capable of connecting to the internet and downloading applications relevant to a car.

According to Lord Bhattacharyya, the present success of JLR is down to this investment in R&D, which has produced

high-quality products such as the Jaguar XJ and the Range Rover Evoque.

"Everything at JLR has been structured and they realise that the key is the product. The cost base has to be right of course, but your product is the key. Geneva and Frankfurt [motor shows] are highly competitive environments. In the past there was only Germany and Japan, now you see Chinese, Indians and Koreans there."

The revitalisation of JLR is not only turning heads at motor shows though, but in Government too.

The Coalition has talked about the need to rebalance the economy and focus education more on business needs. Here, with JLR and its partnership with WMG, is a ready-made success story to build upon.

However, there is concern within industry that this will not be built upon and the Government does not have a growth strategy for manufacturing.

After decades of underachievement in the automotive industry, are politicians unsure of how to support a profitable, high-value and volume car maker employ 17,000 people?

As Lord Bhattacharyya mulls the prospects for UK manufacturing, his disdain for over-strategising becomes clear.

"The problem with roadmaps is that everyone has a roadmap and will come to the same conclusion," he explains.

"So where are your competencies? Anything we do well we should support, and we should create an environment for doing everything well. Let me tell you one thing about WMG – this is no miracle, it is not rocket science. There is not something we have got that others haven't.

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