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## British and American universities 'should merge to beat competition'

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British and American universities could merge to fight off competition from abroad, a report commissioned by Gordon Brown suggests today.

The Prime Minister asked leading vice-chancellors from both sides of the Atlantic to develop their ideas on how the UK and US could collaborate to strengthen their positions.

Universities are springing up in China, Korea, India and the Middle East, posing a potential threat to the supremacy of western institutions.

Their report, published today, says there has been a "special relationship" between British and American universities. But, it argues, the "awakening [of higher education abroad] has created a new tension in UK/US relations in the higher education sector over whether the special relationship will become competitive as much as cooperative."

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The report was written by a study group led by Prof Rick Trainor, president of Universities UK which represents vice-chancellors, and Prof John Sexton, president of New York University.

The authors said: "Higher education has entered an unprecedented period of globalisation - western universities are opening branch campuses abroad and, at the same time, attracting ever-growing numbers of international students to their home campuses.

"Within both the UK and the USA, the higher education sector has long held a position of prominence and prestige — even though there are signs that this position is under threat."

"Globalisation represents the latest, and likely most transformative, competitive arena that our countries face."

Almost a quarter of international students who study abroad choose the US, compared with 12 per cent who come to Britain.

The report says: "Arguably, UK and US collaboration within current parameters has hit a wall... It is unclear what a deepening of the collaborative relationship would mean within the confines of the current framework. There is a need to think radically — even mergers between UK and US institutions might be a goal."

The report recommends setting up an ambitious scholarship, to promote the flow of students across the Atlantic, and to attract the most talented students from abroad.

It would aim to support up to 12,000 students a year, a quarter from Britain, a quarter from America, and half from other countries.

This would be funded by the UK and US governments, private sector, philanthropists, and universities.

Professor Trainor, who is also principal of King's College London, said: "Now, more than ever, collaboration across borders among our leading universities is absolutely necessary.

"The strength of the UK/US partnership, the longstanding pre-eminence of the two countries in the higher education sector, and, more recently, the crisis in the global economy, validate the case for deepened — and internationalised — collaboration."