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**Abstract**

In this essay in a comparative analysis five historically and culturally distinct cases of elite higher education are presented as imperfect realisations of the ideal of academic freedom – medieval universities, early Islamic madrasas, Ottoman palace schools, French grandes écoles and “modern world class research universities”. Special attention is given to the complexities of the French system of higher education and research . It is seen as a bridge between older forms of elite higher education and the quest for international research excellence characterising the current age of mass higher

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**Signature**

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