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**Author**

GAYARDON, Ariane de

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**Abstract**

In the past few years, many countries around the world have debated the financing of higher education. Increasingly, claims emerge that higher education should be free. This article analyses the rationales behind the establishment and sustaining of free tuition higher education systems to understand the current fervour. It then outlines the global contemporary landscape of free higher education, by taking a close look at those countries that currently have free higher education and what is meant by 'free' in different contexts. The many realities behind the term 'free higher education' show that it is a policy that is hard to sustain and hides many different scenarios, notably in terms of access and success in higher education. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)