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**Abstract**

This paper addresses the positioning of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) outreach programmes within universities' operations. Though universities in many respects form a rather homogenous international community, there is wide diversity in regard to the provision of STEM outreach by different institutions. To explain this diversity, a conceptual framework was developed by using the Theory of Legitimacy as an organising concept. The framework considers two opposing scenarios that form a continuum between them, namely: 'top-down' initiative by the university governance versus 'bottom-up' grass-roots initiative. Using the Theory of Legitimacy, internal and external outreach relationships are characterised and explained under the two scenarios. The framework was applied to two settings chosen due to their essential differences in outreach provision, namely, Australia and Israel. The differences that were found in internal and external legitimacy provide a useful lens for examining the low-performing, fragile system in Australia as compared with the high-performing, thriving system in Israel. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)