

# If You Can't Pay Back, Pay It Forward: Proposing an Alumni Donor Behavioural Intention Model

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** An understanding of alumni behavioural intention is essential if public universities intend to outsource the alumni contribution fund. This study explores the predicting factors that affect alumni giving intention to Malaysian public universities.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This conceptual study aimed to present a novel alumni behavioural intention concept. By adopting and extending the theory of planned behaviour, an in-depth explanation of alumni intention to give, university reputation, attitude towards giving, and the facilitating condition is provided.

**Findings:** New insights into the important factors related to alumni donor behavioural intention determinants were obtained by introducing four predictive factors (university reputation, attitude towards giving, subjective norms, and facilitating condition) that might influence alumni giving intention to their alma mater.

**Research limitations/implications:** The suggested model should be further examined.

**Practical implications:** The findings presented suggestions for Malaysian public university management by constructing an alumni behavioural intention model as a basic guide to formulate a comprehensive and sustainable strategy that attracts more alumni to donate to their alma mater in the future.

**Originality/value:** The findings contribute to the understanding of alumni donor behavioural intention in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Alumni giving intention, theory of planned behaviour, university reputation, attitude towards giving, subjective norms, facilitating condition

## **Introduction**

Government allocations are the main source of higher education funding globally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020; Singh, 2014). The recent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused a global economic collapse and affected the ability of governments to cover public university operating expenses (OECD, 2020). As national financing was required to cover increased subsidy costs to reduce the burden on people's spending due to the COVID-19 pandemic, government distributions of public university budget allocations have decreased by the year. Furthermore, public universities were predicted to shift to private contributions given the increased operating costs. Moreover, governments will divert more funding from education to public welfare and health programmes (Elliot, 2006) and national economy recovery plans. The reduced allocations affected public

university incomes and presented challenges to maintaining university rankings and reputations.

Alumni are university ambassadors and campus community members that understand the situation of a university. Therefore, alumni can aid universities in the form of financial and talent contributions to their alma mater (Chase, 2021; Vanderbout, 2010). Nevertheless, most alumni never contribute to their alma maters after graduation (Kaplan, 2007; Lertuttrak & Supitchayangkool, 2014). Alumni contributions were recommended to be examined as an important public university income source, where the practice has been successfully implemented in Western countries, such as the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) (Taylor & Martin, 1995; Muhammad et al., 2014a). Furthermore, the National Higher Development Strategic Plan (PSPTN) 2007–2010 and the Malaysia Education Development Plan (Higher Education) [PPPM(PT)] 2015–2025 proposed alumni giving as a platform that could be explored.

Alumni giving is a potential income source for Malaysian public universities if the university management can attract more alumni to contribute financially in a consistent manner. Therefore, institutions should first understand donor behavioural intentions if they intend to obtain alumni financial contributions (Ho, 2012). Many internal and external factors affect alumni behavioural intention to contribute after graduation, such as employment, salary, debt burden, time, resources, and loyalty to their alma mater. Nonetheless, institutions place little emphasis on awareness of the importance of donor behaviour and their intention to contribute financially (Knowles et al., 2012; Kashif et al., 2015).

Diminishing government support and increasing operation costs challenge the continued survival of public universities. These challenges have led to alumni giving becoming a critical factor in public university sustainability. Over the past decade, numerous researchers focused on alumni intention to donate but there remain many avenues of research in this area as the findings are ambiguous. Previous researchers identified predictors of donor behaviour (Smith & McSweeney, 2007; Verhaert & van de Poel, 2011; Sura et al., 2017; Pérez y Pérez & Egea, 2019), which were divided into individual, interpersonal, and organisational factors. The individual factors include age, income level, attitude, demographic, self-financial management, personnel personality, and self-image (Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Weerts & Ronca, 2007; Clotfelter, 2003; Taylor & Martin, 1995; Cohen, 2006; Sargeant & Lee, 2004; Tohidinia & Mosakhani, 2010; Muhammad et al., 2014b). The interpersonal factors include geographic location and the degree of self-disclosure (Eckel et al., 2017; Meer, 2011), while the organisational factors include administrative excellence, leadership, and university engagement (Baruch & Sang, 2012; Sura et al., 2017; Muhammad et al., 2014b; Shaari et al., 2016).

Institutions should first understand contributor behavioural intention if they intend to obtain alumni donations (Ho, 2012). Thus, university management should comprehend their alumni behavioural intention to attract alumni contributions. Nevertheless, most institutions, including universities, did not emphasise efforts to understand donor behavioural intention (Knowles et al., 2012). Currently, universities encounter several obstacles when soliciting alumni contributions, such as fewer approaches and the lack of awareness by alumni to contribute to their alma mater immediately after graduation (Tierney, 1998; Harris-Vasser, 2003). This conceptual study focuses on alumni intention given that intention is acknowledged as an important predictor of actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Accordingly, a conceptual framework model was proposed involving the predictor factors (university reputation, attitude towards giving, subjective norms, and facilitating condition) that influence alumni giving intention by applying the extended theory of planned behaviour. Identifying the factors that

influence alumni donor intentions would benefit public universities (Baruch and Sang, 2012; Ho, 2012).

## Literature Review

### *Financial Sustainability and Alumni Giving in Malaysia*

Malaysian public universities substantially rely on government subsidies to fund their operations. Comparatively, public universities in Western nations receive little government funding. For example, public universities in the United Kingdom receive 25% funding for their operational costs while those in Australia and New Zealand receive 45% funding; furthermore, Singaporean public universities receive 75% funding (Shaari et al., 2019c; Ahmad, 2015). Contrastingly, Malaysian public universities experience financial pressure and difficulties as a result their continued dependence on government funding to cover their annual operational costs. This dependence is evinced by the fact that the government has provided more than RM6 billion (90%) of the estimated Ministry of Finance public university budget since 2007 (Ahmad et al., 2015; Muhammad et al., 2014b). Subsequently, public universities bear the remaining 10% by self-generating internal resources, such as student fees, commercial revenue, interest from investments, and contributions from corporate organisations, public donors, and philanthropists (Abdul Kadir & Cotter, 2019; Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia [KPM], 2013; Muhammad et al., 2014a). In the 2016 national budget announcement, the government announced a reduction between 5% and 20% in annual grants to all public universities in stages based on the university category (Omar, 2016). This announcement indicated a decrease in central agency assistance.

In 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education presented the Malaysia Education Plan (2015–2020) that outlined 10 key changes in higher education and aimed to ensure the long-term public university financial sustainability through endowment, *waqf* (an Islamic charitable endowment practice that typically involves donating a building, land, or other tangible assets for usage by Muslims or charitable purposes without the intention to reclaim the asset), and fund-raising initiatives. Subsequently, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced the University Transformation Plan Purple Book (UniTPPB) in 2016 to aid university administrations and enhance revenue production from several sources for financial sustainability. The UniTPPB stated that the government would reduce public university financing by a considerable 19.23% in 2017 (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2016). As government funding for universities is continuing to decline due to budgetary constraints, higher learning institutions must identify alternative income sources to bridge the funding gap (Francioni et al., 2021). The UniTPPB provides guidelines for university administrations to increase university revenue from various sources to ensure financial sustainability. Therefore, Malaysian public universities must be prepared to face their financial challenges and identify long-term holistic strategies to generate more income to ensure their financial sustainability. This income is necessary as total annual expenditures, such as salary increases and the costs of raw materials, utilities, and campus facility maintenance, increase rapidly each year.

The decline in annual funding for Malaysian public universities highlights the value of contributions from private donors, who are crucial to sustain institutions that require funding (Tsao & Coll, 2004; Weerts & Ronca, 2007; Kashif et al., 2015; Iskhakova et al., 2020). Alumni are an existing resource for universities, where the demand for alumni support will only increase in the future as graduate numbers increase yearly. Researchers who studied alumni contributions to alma maters (Biedermann, 2020; Harvard, 2019; Monks, 2003; Sung & Yang, 2009; Leslie & Ramey, 1988; Gardner & van der Veer, 1998) also supported the significance of alumni contributions to universities as their contributions were successfully implemented in developed nations, such as the US and the UK (Muhammad et al., 2014a). In 2015, 2016, 2017,

2018, and 2019, US higher education institutions received donations of US\$40.3 billion, US\$41 billion, US\$43.6 billion, US\$46.7 billion, and US\$49.6 billion, respectively, of which 26.9%, 24.2%, 26.1%, 22.6%, and 24.2% were from alumni, respectively (Council for Aid to Education [CAE], 2019). Nonetheless, alumni donation remains limited and receives relatively less serious attention from Malaysian public universities when compared to those of Western countries. Although alumni giving remains less well-established in Malaysia, it is a consistent and substantial institutional funding source (Baruch & Sang, 2012; Stephenson & Bell, 2014).

Philanthropy or giving are common in developed countries but not well-established in Malaysia. Five-year World Giving Index data (2013–2017) demonstrated that Malaysia was ranked 13th among the countries that donated the least. Furthermore, the 2009–2018 trend data revealed that Malaysia was ranked 30th among the countries that contributed the least to charity (Charities Aid Foundation [CAF], 2018, 2019). The aforementioned data demonstrated that Malaysian philanthropy levels remain low compared to those of Western countries (Fernandez, 2002; Nafissa et al., 2015). In Malaysia, philanthropy is not confined to individuals only but widely practiced by non-profit organisations, business organisations, and religious institutions (Ho, 2012). For example, corporate organisations participate in charity services under corporate social responsibility initiatives where the organisation is aware of the duty to contribute to the communities in which it operates (Sagaran, 2012; Ho, 2012).

Malaysian philanthropy culture, specifically among donors to public universities, is not well-established (Abdul Rejab, 2014). Mohd Isa et al. (2016) reported that research on higher education philanthropy is scarce not only in Malaysia but also in other developed nations, such as Australia. This lack of research might result from the low awareness of philanthropy culture. Furthermore, the absence of reporting on community donations to Malaysian higher education renders it challenging to obtain data on the amount and measurement of donations to Malaysia public universities (Mohd Isa, 2014). Thus, public universities that intend to determine alumni donor philanthropy levels should use data records as a measurement.

Regarding Malaysian alumni giving, Muhammad (2017) reported that newly graduated alumni were unprepared to contribute but Shaari et al. (2019a) determined that almost 70% of alumni were ready to contribute to their alma mater. Saraeh et al. (2018) emphasised that to obtain alumni contributions in the future, public universities must provide a good experience while students are still studying. Alumni who believe that they received well-deserved service as a students would strive to maintain a good relationship upon graduation and aid their alma mater.

### ***Extended Theory of Planned Behaviour***

The theory of planned behaviour is an accepted social psychology theory (Ajzen, 1985; 1988; 1991) that is an extension of the theory of reasoned behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The theory of planned behaviour is used extensively to analyse and predict individual intention to encapsulate human behaviour at a particular location and time (Armitage et al., 1999; Tan et al., 2017). Actual behaviour results from the intention that is influenced by attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms. Briefly, intention proximally determines behaviour where a person with a stronger desire to perform a specific behaviour is more likely to perform the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The theory of planned behaviour is the most popular theory for understanding human behaviour activities and has been widely applied by numerous researchers across a vast range of academic disciplines, such as blood donation (Veldhuizen et al., 2011) and charitable giving (Webb et al., 2000).

Following the examination of the variables of the traditional theory of planned behaviour, Ajzen (1991) stated that the theory could accept additional predictors if they could

strengthen predictions and intention variation. Thus, many researchers begin to expand the theory by adding new constructs, such as moral norms and past behaviour (Smith & McSweeney, 2007) and social norms (van der Linden, 2011). Resultantly, a new approach termed the extended theory of planned behaviour was developed. Nevertheless, relatively few studies to date examined the extended theory in the alumni giving context (Yong, 2017; Shaari, 2019b; Havard, 2019). This conceptual study contributes to expansion of the literature that explores extended theory of planned behaviour model application to alumni giving intention to Malaysian public universities.

Theoretically, university reputation is a factor that can influence alumni attitudes towards giving and theory of planned behaviour antecedents. This link is theoretically supported by the theory, which states that the person's changes in the behaviour belief (reputation) will ultimately cause alterations in the attitude towards the behaviour and behaviour intention (Ajzen, 1991). The theory was also used in many studies on reputation (Caruana et al., 2006; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). In this research setting, the theory supports the assertion that potential alumni donors' readiness to donate money (behaviour intention) can be altered due to donor attitudes (positive or negative) regarding the university reputation (behavioural belief).

### ***Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses***

Four factors (independent variables) were examined as predictors of alumni giving intention (dependent variable). The independent variables were university reputation, attitude towards giving, subjective norms, and facilitating condition. Meanwhile, the dependent variable was the alumni giving intention to Malaysian public universities.

#### *Intention to Give*

Ajzen (2005) stated that intention indicates a person's willingness to attempt to engage in the behaviour. Ajzen (1991) believed that a person's actual behaviour is strongly influenced by their intentions, which are strongly affected by attitude (positive or negative assessment of the person executing the behaviour), subjective norms (the social environmental influence or acceptable social pressure on whether the person performs the behaviour), and perceived behaviour control (the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour). In this conceptual research, giving intention represented the alumni's actual behaviour towards donor behaviour as the theory of planned behaviour states that intention is a reliable predictor of actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

#### *University Reputation*

The term 'institutional reputation' refers to the perception of the current performance or past achievement of an institution (Muhammad et al., 2015). Shaari H et al. (2019c) stated that the term 'university reputation' is rooted in the organisational reputation concept. The institutional reputation is an important factor in influencing an alumnus's choice to donate (Baade & Sundberg, 1993; Lindahl, 2010). Organisational reputation is considered an intangible means and a factor of organisational tactical success (Mew & Boenigk, 2013). Telci & Kantur (2014) reported that organisational reputation conception for university reputation should parallel the current education situation to enable better understanding of an academic-specific reputation (a non-corporate reputation).

A multifaceted factor, university reputation is therefore based on how well universities perform in three areas: 1) academic competence, 2) social attractiveness, and 3) responsible management (Shaari et al., 2019c). A donor changes their attitude towards an organisation if

novel knowledge about the organisation becomes available and is combined with earlier attitudes (Mew & Boenigk, 2013). Negative knowledge about a university is combined with prospective alumni donors' earlier attitudes and their attitudes regarding the institution, which would worsen the standing of the focal organisation. A few studies examined how university reputation affected donor attitude behaviour among alumni (Sung & Yang, 2009; Shaari et al., 2017). Mew & Boenigk (2013) and Sarstedt & Schloderer (2010) reported that good standing and attitude that led to alumni readiness to donate time and money were positively related. Hence, the following hypothesis (H) was based on the aforementioned data:

H1: University reputation and attitude towards giving are positively significantly related.

#### *Attitude Towards Giving*

The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) states that a person's response to a behaviour can be explained by their attitude towards the behaviour. This study suggested that alumni giving intention to their alma mater can be explained by their attitude towards giving. Lwin et al. (2013) stated that attitude is the one of the main key functions of donation. In deciding whether to contribute to their alma mater, alumni attitudes towards giving are determined by how they feel (positively or negatively) about the present performance and achievements of the university. Shaari et al. (2019b) studied 311 Malaysian alumni donors and demonstrated that donation attitudes were important in influencing donation behavioural intentions. The aforementioned findings were consistent with those of Shih & Fang (2004), Ho (2012), and Teah et al. (2014). Contrastingly, Kashif et al.'s (2015) examination of Malaysian charity donations reported that charitable donors' attitudes did not influence the donation intention. Based on these previous findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Attitude towards giving and alumni giving intention are positively significantly related.

#### *Subjective Norms*

Subjective norms are another predictor of the theory of planned behaviour that refers to the perceived social pressure to perform or avoid a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). People tend to participate in a certain behaviour with the belief that significant others (family, peers, and community members) will react favourably towards the behaviour and vice versa. Numerous social science studies supported the idea that subjective norms are the key indicators of a person's behavioural intention (Bok & Park, 2019). Past studies reported mixed results regarding subjective norms with behavioural intention. Individual behaviour is influenced by the surrounding people or environmental conditions (Hoyt, 2004; Mann, 2007; Yeap et al., 2021). Nonetheless, a few studies demonstrated that subjective norms appear as weak determinants to predict individual behavioural intentions (Armitage & Corner, 2001). Furthermore, subjective norms positively significantly affected donor behavioural intentions (Verhaert and van de Pol, 2001; Kashif and de Run, 2015; Chen et al., 2019). Additionally, some studies reported that subjective norms did not directly significantly affect donor behavioural intentions (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Knowles et al., 2012; Ho, 2012; Chen et al., 2019; Harvard, 2019). These findings led to the following hypothesis:

H3: Subjective norms and alumni giving intention are positively significantly related.

#### *Facilitating Condition*

In the theory of planned behaviour, perceived behavioural control refers to a person's opinion of the ease or effort of executing the relevant behaviour based on the source that facilitates

performing the action (Ajzen, 1991). Donor behavioural intention influences perceived behavioural control (Blue et al., 2001; Smith & McSweeney, 2007; Awang et al., 2015). In this conceptual study, the facilitating condition was perceived behavioural control. The facilitating condition construct refers to the degree to which a person believes that organisational infrastructure and technique exist to assist technological use (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Thong et al. (2011) stated that the facilitating condition referred to a person’s perception of the difficulty level in implementing behaviours in the absence of resources and resembles perceived behavioural control in the theory of planned behaviour.

Donation is not only performed manually in the digital technology era, but is also performed online (Sura et al., 2017). As the Internet and digital technology provide faster, more efficient, direct, and easier money transfer methods, non-profit organisations have converted from accepting manual donations to receiving donations online. Thus, online donation platforms have become increasingly popular over the past few years (Shier & Handy, 2012; Sura et al., 2017). Accordingly, universities must adapt to the new donation environment by shifting from traditional methods to online contributions. Only a few studies predicted donor intention to use technology for public funding (crowdfunding) using the facilitating condition construct (Li et al., 2017; Wisesa et al., 2019; Sulaeman & Niglasari, 2020; Kasri & Yunjar, 2021) where few studies used it to predict alumni giving intention to alma mater. Therefore, the following hypotheses was proposed:

H4: Facilitating condition and alumni giving intention are positively significantly related.

### Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

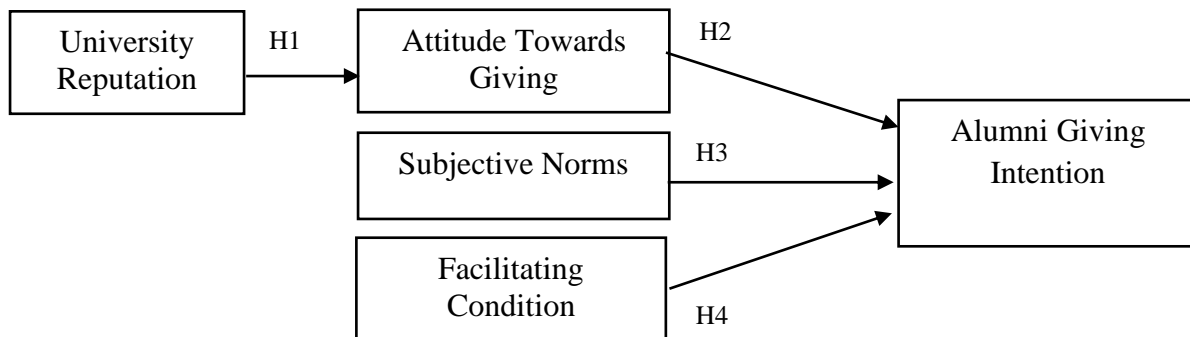


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 depicts the possible predictors of alumni behavioural intention to contribute to their alma mater. This paper suggests a conceptual scaffold that uses the Ajzen (1991) theory of planned behaviour following its flexibility and openness to the addition of predictors to the model if they can contribute to the behaviour and intention variances. The conceptual framework uses the theory of planned behaviour for understanding and predicting human behaviour to provide useful insights into decisions to understand Malaysian alumni giving behavioural intention. This intention is a crucial issue in the current unstable economic conditions. Behavioural intentions can be anticipated based on the attitude regarding the behaviour, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms. Combined with perceived behavioural control, the aforementioned intentions clarify the considerable variance in real behaviour.

Alumni behavioural attitudes to support their alma mater in the future might be based on the belief that the university reputation will depend on the university performance, ranking among top-tier universities, and international achievements. Similar to many other institutions, universities must maintain their reputations. University reputation is becoming one of the most important belief factors, specifically in the current dual national and international framework, which is defined by increasing higher education investment. A university with a good reputation can anticipate a greater intention to donate from prospective donors. Subsequently, this positive belief and attitude will lead to alumni donations to maintain the reputation and ranking of their alma mater. Furthermore, alumni giving intention might also be driven by the theory of planned behaviour constructs of attitude regarding giving and subjective norms. Attitude towards giving and subjective norms (social, community, family, and peer pressure) regarding donation can be factors that influence alumni to contribute to their alma mater. Moreover, the facilitating condition explores alumni perception of the difficulty level while contributing in the absence of resources, skills, or opportunity needed. Thus, the identified of university reputation and facilitating condition can bridge the research gap in alumni giving behavioural intention by proving that this construct can be a new prognosticator in the extended theory of planned behaviour.

### **Conclusion**

Alumni are present, past, and future assets to all public and private universities. As federal government allocations continue to be reduced annually, alumni involvement as part of the internal resources channel is essential to accommodate the university financial resource deficit as the graduate numbers increase every year. Therefore, it is highly important to ascertain the predictors that will affect alumni intention to contribute to Malaysian public universities. Hence, this study measured alumni intention towards giving by using the extended theory of planned behaviour. The proposed influencing factors are university reputation, attitude towards giving, subjective norms, and facilitating condition.

This conceptual research also enhanced current knowledge by highlighting the important factors related to the determinants of alumni giving intention to their alma mater. Theoretical research on alumni giving behavioural intentions in Malaysia remains limited. Two new predictors (university reputation and facilitating condition) were identified as being able to bridge the research gap in alumni giving intention based on proof that they can be new predictors in the extended theory of planned behaviour. This conceptual research also explained the intention to give, university reputation, attitude towards giving, subjective norms, and facilitating condition in-depth. This conceptual study is unique as it proposed a conceptual framework model involving the predictor factors that influence alumni giving intentions in the Malaysian public university context.

Lastly, by enabling understanding of alumni behavioural intentions, the findings can benefit the government, specifically Ministry of Higher Education and public university management. The conceptual framework model can be used as a basic guide to formulate a holistic, comprehensive, and sustainable strategic plan to attract more alumni to contribute to their alma mater. This research is also useful to public universities as it proposed an alternative revenue source: alumni giving.

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