

## **Contributory Factors: Determinants Influencing Trade Union Membership Decision**

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### **Abstract**

Presently, there are 24 trade unions at local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia. These trade unions are well regulated by the Association of Presidents and Honorary Secretaries of Malaysian University/IPTA Staff Unions (GAKUM). However, trade union membership is required to assess a trade union's strength. Therefore, this study sought to identify the factor(s) influencing membership decision in trade union among the union members. A total of 531 union members from 20 local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia involved in this study. Respondents were selected through systematic random sampling technique and the data were collected using online questionnaires. The study showed that the most prominent factors in influencing trade union membership decision is personal factors, followed by employee rights, and social influence. Nevertheless, respondents contributed the lowest perception of the leadership factor and these situations indicate leadership factor have no significant and positive relationship with trade union membership decision. Thus, the governing body, union leader and committees should formulate strategies focusing on leadership factor to increase trade union membership. Besides, responsible parties such as social researcher should continue play their role in encouraging and supporting unions member to stay committed in the union so that they continue to be motivated, open towards innovation, and strive to improve their socio-employment status and quality of life.

**Keywords:** Trade Union, Membership, Rights, Organizational, Management

### **Introduction**

Trade unionism has existed since the industrial revolution. The adoption of the ILO Constitution in 1919 indicates that people begin to believe that economic growth is possible without subjecting the working class to inhumane conditions, but rather by actively promoting respect for the working class (Mwamazingo et al., 2015). In fact, the formation and participation in trade unions is a fundamental human right recognised under subheading four of Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Under the Trade Union Act 1959, a trade union is an organization or association of workers or employers working in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah or Sarawak. It refers to an entity that represents the welfares of employees or employers differentiated by region, trade,

occupation or industry. Meanwhile, the Trade Union Act 1959 also provides special conditions for government employee trade unions and statutory bodies (Section 27, Trade Union Act 1959 and Trade Unions (Exemption of Public Officers Notification, 1981). The movement of public trade unions and statutory bodies is also moderately different from private trade unions based on the provisions of the Industrial Relations Act 1967. August 2019, there are 759 registered trade unions throughout Malaysia of which 503 are private unions, 169 are government trade unions and 87 are statutory body trade unions with a total membership of 930,790 people (Department of Trade Union Affairs, 2022). In the context of statutory body trade unions, the number of trade unions among public higher education institutes (IPTA) is almost one third.

Trade union membership refers to all individuals who have paid their membership fees on time (Lawrence & Ishikawa, 2005). According to Lawrence and Ishikawa, high membership reflects an organization's organisational power and efficiency in influencing workers and employers in a country's industrial relations landscape. Workers join trade unions to obtain the benefits for which unions fight because workers cannot do so on their own (Johari, 1999). Union membership reflects the strength and status of the union (Ganesan, 2016). The decline in trade union membership has an impact on union power and its effectiveness in representing existing members' interests and rights at work. This, in turn, has an impact on partnership within the Malaysian industrial relations landscape, because unions are known as the bodies that work on dispute resolution and are involved in collective bargaining (Ganesan, 2016). This declining pattern has posed a challenge and a threat to unions' ability to remain relevant in the industrial relations system (Rose et al., 2011). Previous research has shown that union leadership, union commitment (Ganesan, 2016; Johari & Ghazali, 2011; Ramasamy, 2015), union effectiveness (Tarumaraja et al., 2017), employee perceptions towards union (Rose et al., 2011), current economic climate, and political condition all influence trade union membership decisions among workers (Said et al., 2002). The effectiveness of trade union membership is determined by the members' attitude (Selamoglu & Urhan, 2008).

Employee attitudes and behaviours toward unions shape employee perceptions of unions. Workers' perceptions of the union are influenced by their experiences with the union (Selamoglu & Urhan, 2008). The perception influences new employees' decision to join a union. Negative attitudes and distrust among members reflect poorly on the union. As a result, new workers believe there is no benefit to joining a union. Non-union members do not feel compelled to join a union because they are satisfied with their working environment and job conditions (Rose et al., 2011). According to Rose et al (2011), it is critical for unions to communicate with and approach non-members in order to disseminate information about the union, its unique characteristics, and benefits to union members. Since 1990, trade union membership and density have been declining worldwide. Kuruville et al (2002) found that economic changes, political ideology, and legislation all impede unionization in certain countries. European countries are also experiencing a decline in union membership. Ramasamy (2015) stated that the decline in union density can be attributed to various reasons such as the inability of trade unions to organize new establishments, partly on lowered worker interest and stiffened management opposition to unionism, unfavorable changes in the political and legal environment for collective bargaining. Furthermore, it can be argued that a large part of the decline in Malaysian trade union density is due to increased management resistance to new unionism and decreased worker interest in unions, both of which have been

exacerbated by a tougher economic environment aided by a more pro-employer legal environment.

Union leadership is defined as an appointed individual's commitment to represent a union in order to improve and protect the rights of the workers covered by the respective union (Ramasamy, 2015). According to Hammer et al (2009), a union leader is a member of the social context to which workers or people belong. They go on to say that the actions of union leaders have an impact on union membership. Union leadership also refers to the ability of union leaders to encourage positive behaviour and perceptions of the union, as well as to drive strategies and activities for the union (Ganesan, 2016). Leaders are viewed as dynamic and knowledgeable individuals from various work backgrounds and organisations. They are expected to have a sense of solidarity in order to represent union members, to be clear about union goals and direction, and, most importantly, to have high integrity as leaders (Ramasamy, 2015). Highly skilled leaders keep union members loyal and attract non-members to the movement. Leaders who are competent in their roles bring workers together under the umbrella of the union (Ramasamy, 2015).

Trade unions of public higher education institutions in Malaysia can be divided into 5 zones. The first zone is the middle zone consisting of Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Pusat Perubatan Universiti Malaya terdiri daripada, Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Putra Malaysia (KEPERTAMA), Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kesatuan Kakitangan Sokongan Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (KESUPNA), Kesatuan Kakitangan Umum Universiti Universiti Teknologi Mara, Universiti Of Malaya General Staff Union (Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Malaysia) and Kesatuan Kakitangan Am International Islamic University Malaysia (KURNIA). The south zone refers to the Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (KEKUTEM), Kesatuan Kakitangan Pelaksana Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, and Kesatuan Kakitangan Sokongan Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (KUSIMA). Meanwhile, the North Zone consists of Kesatuan Kakitangan Pelaksana Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kesatuan Kakitangan Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), and Kesatuan Pegawai Am Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Eastern zone refers to Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (KUAT), Kesatuan Kumpulan Pelaksana Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kesatuan Staf Pelaksana Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, and Kesatuan Kakitangan Sokongan Universiti Malaysia Pahang. Trade union in Sabah Zone refers to the General Staff Union of Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Then, the Sarawak zone is Kesatuan Kakitangan Am Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Kesatuan Pegawai Pelaksana Universiti Putra Malaysia Kampus Bintulu Sarawak (KEPEKASA).

These unions move separately according to their respective regions in line with the requirements of the Trade Union Act 1959. As of January 2022, there are 24 trade unions with a total membership of 24,881 people in all IPTAs in Malaysia (Table 1). The number of these trade unions is more concentrated in the central zone of Peninsular Malaysia, which is as many as 10 trade unions with a membership of 17,311 people in line with the number of public high-paying institutes found in this zone. The rest are in Sabah with one trade union and Sarawak with two trade unions (Table 1)

Table 1

*Number and IPTA Trade Unions Membership in Malaysia*

<b>Zone</b>	<b>Number of Trade Union</b>	<b>Number of Membership</b>
Middle	10	17,311
South	4	19,35
East	4	1,049
North	4	5,059
Sabah	1	693
Sarawak	1	769
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24,881</b>

Source: Malaysian Trade Union Affairs Department, 2022

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

A cross-sectional quantitative research method was used to analyze the contributory factors: determinants influencing trade union membership decision. In cross-sectional research, data were collected from the research participants at a single point in time or relatively short time period (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Thus, the researchers did not directly measure changes that come over time in this study but rather used descriptive statistics (percentage, average mean) to report the data analysis and findings. Online self-administered questionnaire was adapted by using a cross-sectional design method. 22 trade unions at local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia were chosen considering the majority population. The name lists of union members were provided by the president weeks before data collection. From the list, members' samples were selected using systematic random sampling. Online self-administration questionnaire was used as it is more reliable because respondents are free to execute the task without any "interference" of the researcher.

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study were unions member at 20 local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia. A total of (n=531) participants from 20 local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia were involved in this study. Respondents were male (n = 257, 48.4%) and female (n = 274, 51.6%). Aged 36 to 40 years (n= 145, 27.3%), 41 to 45 years (n= 121, 22.8%), 46 to 50 years (n=115, 21.7%), 31 to 35 years (n= 59, 11.1%), 51 to 55 years (n= 48, 9%), 26 to 30 years old (n= 21, 4%), 56 to 60 years old (n=15, 2.8%), and 18 to 25 years old (n=7, 1.3%). Majority of the respondents (n= 410, 77.2%) were from Malay, followed by Bumiputera Sabah Sarawak (n= 95, 17.9%), Indian (n=19, 3.6%), and Chinese (n= 7, 1.3%). The length of services among the respondents recorded were 11 to 15 years which dominates overall population (n=158, 29.8%), 16 to 20 years which is the same (n= 143, 26.9%), 21 years and above (n= 130, 24.5%), 6 to 10 years (n= 69, 13%), and 1 to 5 years (n= 31, 5.8%). Meanwhile the lengthiest membership historical is 16 to 20 years (n= 161, 30.3%), 11 to 15 years (n=140, 26.4%), 6 to 10 years (n= 122, 23%), 21 years and above (n= 75, 14.1%), and 1 to 5 years (n= 33, 6.2%).

### ***Measures***

*Personal Factors.* Examples of the items are "I joined a union because I could voice my opinion", "I joined a union because I wanted to improve my employment status", "I joined a

trade union because I wanted to help my fellow workers”, and “I joined the union because I wanted to give moral support to the union”. Respondents were asked to rate to the statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability was  $\alpha = .76$ .

*Employee Rights.* Examples of the items are “I joined a union to keep my job secure”, “I joined a union to achieve better benefits” (Example: critical allowance, overtime allowance), “I joined a union to protect myself from oppression by employers”, and “most workers can enjoy better benefits by joining a union”. Respondents were asked to rate to the statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability was  $\alpha = .75$ .

*Social Influence.* Examples of the items are “I joined the trade union because the activities organized were appropriate and relevant”, “I joined a union because I believe in the importance of unionization in the workplace”, “I joined the union because of the influence of my colleagues”, and “trade unions are a positive movement in universities”. Respondents were asked to rate to the statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability was  $\alpha = .78$ .

*Leadership.* Examples of the items are “in general I have a positive view of the leadership of the trade union in my place”, “I became a union member because of the progressive leadership”, “responsible union leaders made me interested in joining the union”, and “I became a union member because the union at my workplace was influential”. Respondents were asked to rate to the statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability was  $\alpha = .77$ .

Table 2

*Reliability Assessment of the Final Instrument*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Cronbach’s Alpha</b>
Personal Factors	$\alpha = .76$
Employee Rights	$\alpha = .75$
Social Influence	$\alpha = .78$
Leadership	$\alpha = .77$

**Analysis of Data**

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22, with descriptive analysis. The purpose of the descriptive analysis was to characterize the respondent’s demographic background, the distributions of each variable, and the levels of variables in which comprises frequencies and percentages. The data were statistically analyzed based on frequency and mean to identify the factor(s) influencing membership decision in trade union among the respondents. The data for this study were collected using self-administered questionnaire, which was more suitable because respondents are free to execute the task without interference by the researcher. During the data collection, respondents in the study was gave a brief explanation about the study purpose and how to answer the questionnaire that was given to them. Also, the respondents were instructed to answer the items as honestly as possible, and were given the assurance that the researcher will keep their personal information confidential and will only be used for academic purposes. Then, the questionnaire was distributed to the respondents. The self-administrated questionnaire was the most suitable material to use for this study because the

respondents were free to execute the task without interference by the researcher. Data analysis much be easier when the online questionnaire are available in Malay language. Therefore, the researcher, with the help of two enumerators assisted the respondents in individually to explain certain details about the items.

### **Results and Discussion**

The study hypothesized that respondents reported higher scores in personal factors as a contributory factor in influencing trade union membership decision. Generally, respondents contributed the highest perception of this personal factor with a mean score of 3.84 (76.8 %). Meanwhile, respondents gave the second highest perception of the employee rights with a mean score of 3.77 (75.4 %). For social influence factor, respondents reported the mean score of 3.30 (68.4%). However, respondents contributed the lowest perception of this leadership factor with a mean score of 2.97 (59.4%). Next, a comparison is presented based on the contributory factor in influencing trade union membership decision. The three engagement factors that recorded the highest mean scores were the personal factor with a mean score of 3.84 (76.8 %), the employee rights with a mean score of 3.77 (75.4 %), and the social influence factor with a mean score of 3.30 (68.4 %).

Constructed on the findings obtained, respondents believe that personal factors, employee rights, and social influence are factors that attract respondents to continue to consistently involve themselves in the union. Respondents also stated that personal development could be seen in terms of activities that increase a person's talent, potential, job, awareness and ability to realize dreams and create success. Furthermore, personal development allows a person to have a personal vision of the future, which gives them a vibrant idea of what and where they will be in the future. In many countries, be it developed or developing countries, personal factors are going through an institutional decline due to globalization inception. This is due to the structural changes in economy and labor force, unemployment caused by new technologies, demographic changes in the labor market, and aging population (Krasenkiene, Kazokiene, & Susniene, 2014). Meanwhile, the factor of workers' rights plays a significant role among respondents to ensure that they are aware of the workers' rights. In fact, the formation and participation in trade unions are a basic human right which is recognized under subheading four of the Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Strong trade unions are important to protect workers' rights from possible violations by the employers, besides being a medium to boost labor productivity (Kana, 2015). Low union membership and trade union density adversely affect union strength in collective bargaining on matters relating to the members' needs in the tripartite labor system. Social influence also shows the importance of consensus with colleagues to join the union as well as supporting a dynamic work environment as a catalyst to continue joining the union in the future. Workers join trade union to gain the benefits that unions fight for them as workers are unable to do it on their own (Johari, 1999). An interesting finding is that all respondents believe that more efforts need to be made to increase the confidence of other colleagues to join the union in the future. In general, greater efforts need to be completed to increase workers' understanding of the importance of joining a union while eliminating negative perceptions about union membership.

However, this study shows the leadership factor as a less satisfactory engagement factor with a mean score of 2.97 (59.4 %). This situation shows a very large value gap between the three factors above. In general, respondents recorded the lowest score on the items 'I have a

positive view of the leadership of the trade union in my place', 'I became a union member because of the progressive leadership', 'The responsible union leader made me interested in joining the union', and 'I became a union member because the trade union at my workplace was influential'. Hammer, Bayazit & Wazeter (2009) define union leader as part of the social context in which workers or people belong to. They add that the acts of union leaders affect union membership. Obviously, this leadership issue is not a major factor in the respondents' involvement in the union. The researcher believes that the improvement recommendations should be implemented to ensure that the elements of leadership and meeting management succeed in enticing the attention of individuals to join the union. Deprived of good union leadership, a union fails to achieve its founding mission and the roles of its members are blurred. The study also identified the need to improve the issue of union leadership because the involvement of workers nowadays is more dynamic and more concerned with the quality of a union. Leaders are perceived as dynamic and knowledgeable individuals, who come from different working backgrounds and organizations. They are supposed to have sense of solidarity to represent union members, are clear with union goals and direction, and the most important thing is that they should have high integrity as the leaders (Ramasamy, 2015). Highly-skilled leaders make the members loyal to the unions and attract non-members to join the movement. Leaders who are competent in carrying out their roles unite workers under the union (Ramasamy, 2015).

### **Conclusion and Future Recommendations**

The results have provided insight to several prediction factors that have significant influenced in explaining trade union membership among union members. A total of (n=531) participants from 20 local institutes of higher learning in Malaysia were involved in this study. Personal factors, employee rights, social influence, and leadership are the few elements to identify the factor(s) influencing membership decision in the union. Overall, the majority of respondents had a high level of perception for all three factors dimensions namely personal factors, employee rights, and social influence. This situation indicates the union members believe and agree that trade unions are committed and effective in meeting the expectations of union members. These findings also designate that respondents have a good view of the objective of trade union, in which they believe that union can increase employment opportunities and further enhance their knowledge of participating in union. In addition, the majority of the respondents also agree that the union offers many benefits to the members in terms of assistance, knowledge, experience gained and guidance from relevant programmed. However, respondents contributed the lowest perception of the leadership factor in this study. From this result, majority of the respondent put a lowest confidence to the leadership aspect of the union. Here, leadership became a crucial element for the members to stay committed in the union presently and future.

The findings help researchers make recommendations for future trade union body implementation to increase union membership and retain existing members. It was discovered that union leadership, have a significant impact on trade union membership decisions among union members in this study. This indicated that employees are more likely to join the union as a result of the union's effectiveness and commitment on the part of the union leaders. Based on the short interview with a trade union president, for a situational analysis on trade union membership, this study discovered that the decline in trade union membership among civil servants is currently a major problem in most trade union bodies in

the Malaysian public sector, with current membership of less than 40% of the 1.6 million total workforce. Trade unions can implement appropriate strategies to increase union leadership by offered few courses related leadership to the presidents. Thus, the goal of this study is clear that to identify few factors influencing members to join trade unions and get better knowledge in order to restructure activities and strategies. Then, union bodies in Malaysia can retain existing members while also attracting younger generations to join union movement. The issues mentioned above are just a few of the issues that unions faced because they are unable to use the union when the number of voices on the union committee is small. In a tripartite system, this reduces collective bargaining power. To ensure the survival of trade unions, it is critical to identify and comprehend the factors that influence civil servants' decisions, which later contribute to an increase in trade union membership. Less membership means fewer voices to represent members' interests at the national level. The findings may also aid the governing body and union leaders in developing a more effective strategy to secure strong commitment among union members, resulting in an increase in union membership. This is to ensure the survival of the Malaysian trade union movement.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thanks the Department of Trade Union Affairs, Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia for providing financial support and Kesatuan Kakitangan Am UPM (KEPERTAMA) for their corporation. This work was supported by the GPKS 2022 research grant.

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