

***How Did Traditional Nomadic Herders Increase in the Past Decade?  
–The Relations of Higher Education, TVET, and Career Trajectory***

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**Abstract**

This study aims to reveal the growth factors in nomadic herders, featuring the relations of higher education, TVET, and the job market in Mongolia. Past studies demonstrated the dramatic decrease of herder households in young generations in Mongolia due to the vulnerability under climate change and preference for an urban lifestyle after the mobility to the capital city owing to the transition to higher education. On the other hand, government statistic shows that the rate of herder households in the early twenties has increased in the past ten years. Analyzing qualitative data collected from the interviews with ten young nomadic herder families, four vocational and technical education institutions, and two higher education institutions in October 2022, the author discovered both negative and positive factors of why people chose to be nomadic herders despite the hardship. First, the high unemployment rate impacts the negative choice of nomadic herders. Another accelerating factor is the government policy to support poor herders under thirty-five years old. In this policy, young people register as poor herders to receive grant funding, although they do not make a living by raising cattle. Positive factors are the firm belief and respect for nature and animals. Young nomadic interviewees showed sound responsibility to succeed in their family business without wondering about other directions. This study also clarified the contradiction between government statistics and the actual number of young herders. Young herders exist in the research target area in statistical data, but the absolute herders decreased in the past decade.

Keywords: Nomadic Herders, Higher Education, TVET, Career Trajectory, Mongolia

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## Introduction

Mongolia borders Russia in the north and China in the south. Mongolia comprises herder households nationwide, which is 19.92% of the country's households (National Statistics Office of Mongolia: NSO 2022). In 1924, Mongolian People's Republic was founded, and it had been a socialist state for almost 70 years until it renamed the country to Mongolia in 1992 while transitioning to democracy.

Past studies show that young generations and small-sized households lost their interest in traditional herder pastoralists (Soma 2020) because they prefer working in the mining and quarrying sector or involving themselves in the service sector in the capital city to staying in the countryside to succeed in their family herding business (Yasui 2019). Indeed, herding has many hardships, including a heavy 24-hour workload without a holiday. Along with the severe natural disasters followed by the abrupt climate change, less experienced herders will likely lose their cattle, such as sheep, goats, cows, and horses, during winter and spring. Many vulnerable families who lost their cattle have moved to the capital city in recent decades. Their mobilisation aims to take the opportunities for new jobs, better social and health services, and a better educational environment (Konagaya 2013, Hoshino 2013, and Nakamura 2017, 2020).

Many studies demonstrate the problem of urbanisation. 84.1% of universities are in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar (NSO 2021, Ariuntuya 2021). As of 2020, 138,237 students out of 147,293 study in UB (93.85%) (NSO 2021). After graduating from universities and other higher education institutions, young people choose to stay in the capital because they do not see any advantages if they return to their hometown or rural area to start their job carrier (Yasui 2021).

Although the past literature describes many hardships in succeeding the traditional herding work in young generations, the national statistical data shows that the number of herder households has increased since 2012 (NSO 2021) (Figure 1). The number was 207,824 in 2012 and grew to 242,024 in 2020 (NSO 2021). During these years, the natural disaster of a severe cold climate, called Dzud in Mongolia, occurred from winter 2015 to spring 2017. Even after this period, the number of herder households kept increasing despite the significant loss of livestock (NSO 2021).

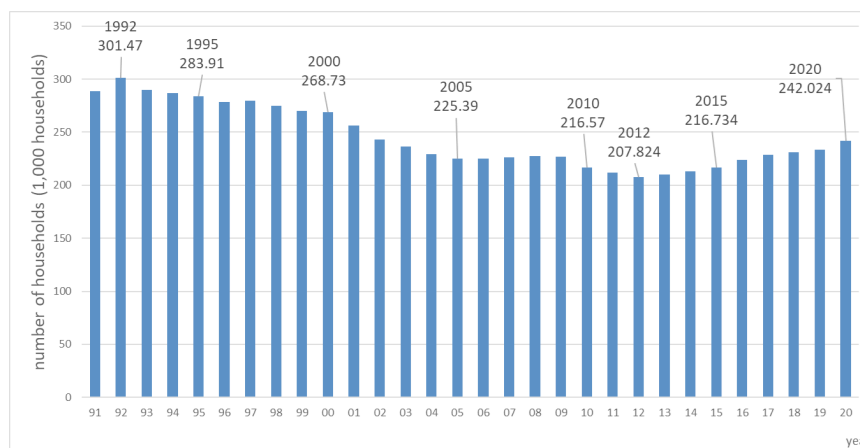


Figure 1: Total number of herder households

Source : the author made the figure based on Mongolian Statistical Information Services (NSO 2021)

This study aims to reveal the growth factors in nomadic herders, featuring the relations of higher education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and the job market in Mongolia. Based on the qualitative data analysis, the study clarifies both positive and negative factors and motives why young generations decided to become nomadic herders despite many hardships.

## Methodology

This paper uses the national statistical data from the National statistics office of Mongolia (NSO) and the datasets of semi-structured interviews with rural nomadic herder families, vocational and technical education institutions, and higher education institutions. In October 2022, the author researched one of the rural prefectures and the capital city in Mongolia. Table 1 shows the list of interviewees.

Table 1: List of interviewees

<b>Category</b>	<b>gender (age)</b>	<b>details</b>
Nomadic family	male (19)	7 years of herding, working with parents
	male (28)	14 years of herding, working with parents
	male (28)	9 years of herding, parents were nomad
	female (30)	6 years of herding after marriage
	female (30)	11 years of herding, parents were nomad
	male (34)	15 years of herding, parents were nomad
	male (37)	20 years of herding, parents were nomad
	female (36)	13 years of herding after marriage
	male (38)	16 years of herding, parents were nomad
	female (37)	16 years of herding after marriage
	male (42)	20 years of herding, parents were nomad
	female (39)	20 years of herding, parents were nomad
male (39)	22 years of herding, parents were nomad	
TVET institutions	<b>school location</b>	<b>school type, the year of foundation</b>
	VTPC in A Prefecture	private school, founded in 2012
	VTPC in A Prefecture	private school, founded in 19xx
	VTPC in A Prefecture	public school, founded in 1942
	VTPC in Ulaanbaatar	private school, founded in 1993
	Polytechnic college in the suburb of the capital city	public school, founded in 1954

## Change in the number of herders by age group

Table 2 shows the comparison rate from 2009 to 2018, which illustrates the number of herders and total population by age group. The number of herders decreased compared to the population change in the age groups of 15-19, 25-29, and 30-34. These data support the past literature in that young people prefer an urban lifestyle after mobility to the capital city. However, in the age groups of 20-24 and 35 years and above, the number of herders shows solid growth in the past ten years when comparing the population growth. Young generations in their 20s and 30s comprise many university and TVET graduates due to the increasing enrolment rate in these institutions (Figure 2 and Figure 3). According to Gantogtokh (2018), the continuous rate in higher education was 14.0% in 1991, drastically rising to 69.0% in 2017. Students study in various academic domains in universities or take professional courses in TVET institutions, but most do not specialise in animal husbandry (NSO 2021). Young generations who became herders had studied different majors apart from herding. Under these circumstances, there must be some motive for why they chose to become herders.

Table 2: Employment in animal husbandry by age group (2009-2018 comparison)

Age group		2009-2018 comparison
15-19	number of herders	68.46%
15-19	total population	79.61%
20-24	number of herders	<b>87.82%</b>
20-24	total population	<b>82.50%</b>
25-29	number of herders	89.24%
25-29	total population	117.94%
30-34	number of herders	118.21%
30-34	total population	128.83%
35-39	number of herders	<b>147.01%</b>
35-39	total population	<b>118.10%</b>
40-44	number of herders	<b>177.62%</b>
40-44	total population	<b>122.06%</b>
45-49	number of herders	<b>172.82%</b>
45-49	total population	<b>118.94%</b>
50-54	number of herders	<b>145.83%</b>
50-54	total population	<b>140.73%</b>
55-59	number of herders	<b>187.72%</b>
55-59	total population	<b>178.28%</b>
60-64	number of herders	167.41%
60-64	total population	173.30%
65-69	number of herders	<b>131.81%</b>
65-69	total population	<b>113.85%</b>
70+	number of herders	<b>224.45%</b>
70+	total population	<b>117.53%</b>

Source: the author made the table based on Mongolian Statistical Information Services (NSO 2021)

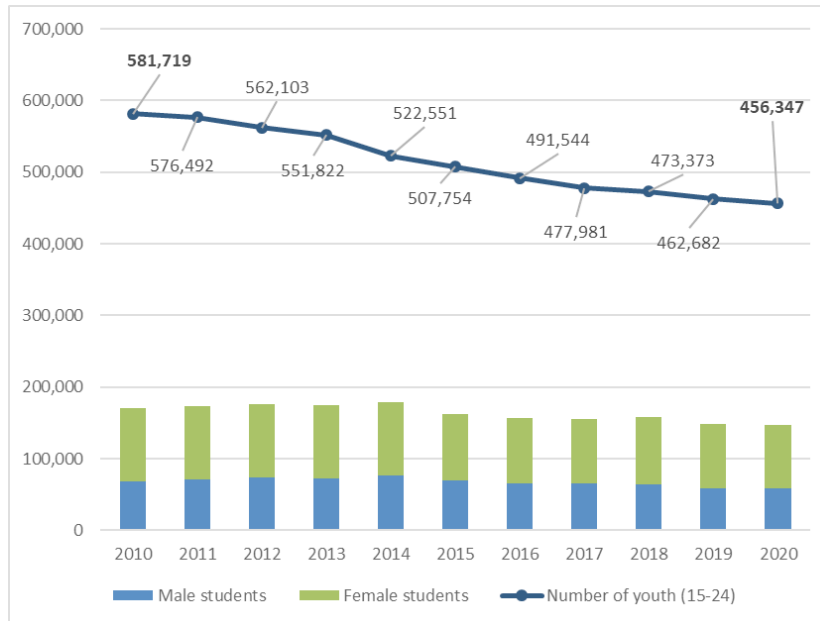


Figure 2: Young population and student number in higher education (2010-2020)  
 Source: the author made the figure based on Mongolian Statistical Information Services (NSO 2021)

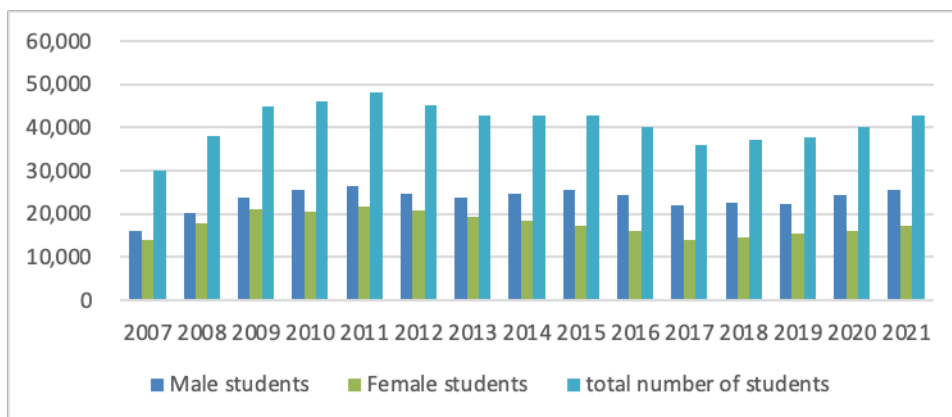


Figure 3: Student number in TVET (2007-2021)  
 Source: the author made the figure based on Mongolian Statistical Information Services (NSO 2021)

## Factors and motives to become traditional nomadic herders

### *Negative factors and governmental policy*

The semi-constructed interview's target area is one of Mongolia's rural prefectures. The prefecture is in the Khangai (mountainous) region, where the highest number of herders exist in the country. In the prefecture centre, the research team asked the prefectural government official, district mayor, village leader, and residents to find young nomadic pastoralists in the community. It was not easy to reach young herders because local people acknowledged that young people rarely succeeded in the family herding business in recent years. After interviewing nomadic herder families and school teachers and staff, some negative factors and the related government policy were identified.

Young people aged 20-24 are the generation right after the completion of higher education or TVET. These young people need help finding a job due to the high unemployment rate in the country. As shown in Figure 4, youth with high educational attainment show a higher unemployment rate than those who completed primary and secondary education. Therefore, young people in their early 20s are likely to choose to become herders when they have no other job opportunities.

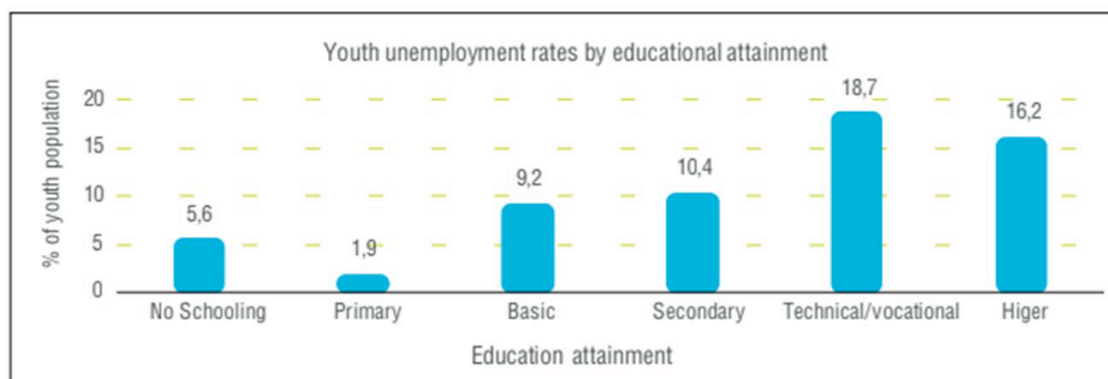


Figure 4: Youth unemployment rates by educational attainment, 15- to 24- Year-Olds, 2011  
 Source : TVET Policy Review Mongolia 2019 (UNESCO · Mongolia Ministry of Labour and Social Protection 2019: 46)

In addition, the government policy to develop the herding sector backed young, poor herders to give a grant. Under this policy, young herders under thirty-five years old who have less than 100 cattle (sheep, goats, and other animals) can receive a grant of approximately 2,830 USD. With this grant, they can buy a motorbike and other indispensable tools for herding business. Owing to the introduction of this policy, the registered number of young herders increased; however, most of them do not make their living with herding. They keep a small number of animals but rely on families and relatives to raise their cattle and do other side business. This reality must be clarified between government data and the number of young herding people in the research target area.

### ***Positive factors and motives to succeed traditional nomadic herding***

By analysing the qualitative data from semi-constructed interviews, many positive factors and strong motives were identified. All interviewees in the target area were born into nomadic families. They have a solid responsibility to succeed in the family business. They are willing to be a traditional nomadic herder. Those herders take pride in herding work and respect nature and animals. They admit to the severe conditions of nature and hard work as pastoralists. However, they accept all these hardships and succeed in their parents' family business without wondering about other future directions.

"I graduated from a university in UB. I specialised in rare metal, so I might have been able to find a job in the mining sector. But I wanted to come back to my hometown."  
*(28-year-old male)*

"Did not think about other jobs."  
*(30-year-old female, 34-year-old male and many others)*

"I took after my parents' cattle."  
*(19-year-old male, 28-year-old male, and many others)*

"I love nature and horses. Why should I choose a different job?"  
*(39-year-old male)*

## **Conclusion**

Despite the hardship, this study clarified the negative and positive factors of why people chose to be nomadic herders. First, the high unemployment rate impacts the negative choice of nomadic herders. Another accelerating factor is the government policy to support poor herders under thirty-five years old. Positive factors are the firm belief and respect for nature and animals. Young nomadic interviewees showed sound responsibility to succeed in their family business without considering other trajectories. This study also clarified the contradiction between government statistics and the actual number of young herders. Young herders exist in the research target area in statistical data, but the absolute herders decreased in the past decade.

In this research, the author conducted the interviews in a limited target area with ten young nomadic herder families, four vocational and technical education institutions, and two higher education institutions. This paper demonstrates only one case study; further research will complement the study results.

From the perspective of the high unemployment rate for highly educated youth, the country needs to expand the job market for skilled young generations. In considering the vital responsibility of young nomadic herders to inherit the tradition, policymakers should support protecting traditional nomadic herders. Finally, as for the inconsistency or the contradiction between the government statistics and the number of young herders, the government needs to revise the government grant funding policy, which will involve the young herders in the actual herding business.

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