

INGSA CASE STUDIES

FREUDANIA: *Youth Mental Health*

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FREUDANIA

Youth Mental Health

Background and context

Freudania is a relatively secular Asian Country with a population of 13 million. Its GDP is US\$14200 per capital and with a GDP growth rate predicted for the coming year of 3.7%. It has undergone remarkable economic transition since its independence some 45 years ago. Its economy has been transformed from a commodity-based food (rice, tea) and minerals (coal) exporter to being seen as a new “Asian Tiger” as its economy is now based on technology and innovation: it is a centre for both animation and gaming entrepreneurs, health technologies (especially IT based devices) and for cybersecurity software. It has a centre for quantum computing which is ranked in the top 10 in the world.

The capital is Asta, which now has a population of 4.2 million. Asta is known as a ‘smart city’ with many high-tech sensor systems being used to make for an efficient and clean city. Most people now live in modern apartments and few areas of historical slums remain. It is a parliamentary democracy and the Prime Minister is a former professor of mathematics. The major party in power is business friendly and seen as socially conservative appealing more to the older generations and provincial communities. It is in coalition with a small nationalistic right wing party. The opposition comprised two parties in informal coalition - one is derived from the trade unions and one, which is a “green party”. Thus, the opposition is seen as more environmentally friendly, socially conscious, supporting more progressive taxes and appeals more to the urban technology orientated and younger elements in the community. The last election saw the government win by a narrow majority and political commentators think the government could lose the next election.

The population is polyglot with two major ethnicities, each representing about 45% of the indigenous population. These two groups differ in religion and custom. Although there were some ethnic tensions in the early years after independence, successive governments have worked hard to create social cohesion. This has been achieved in part by a heavy focus on education and creating a sense of national pride. In the early years, national service was compulsory for both males (in the military) and females (in social work) as a nation building programme, but this was abandoned 25 years ago, as it was no longer seen as necessary. One aspect of nation building has been in promoting sport and Freudians have done well at the Olympic games especially in the martial arts, archery, shooting and in swimming. However, many have complained that all the money goes into elite sports and not into community sports.

Because of this relative stability and a commitment to a rule of law, a large number of multinational companies, especially in those advanced technology have regional centres in Freudania and there is a

vibrant start-up community. As a result, 25% of the population of Asta are not from Freudania – about half are Westerners and about half from the region.

Consumerism has taken off with all this success. 90% of children have a smart phone by the age of 10. Most in the middle classes have credit cards by the age of 14. Success for children in Freudania now depends on getting into the best schools and best universities. The competition for success even starts at preschool with some kindergartens having entry tests. Even parents from lower socioeconomic families drive their children in a very exam conscious way, insisting that they stay home after school doing extra study.

Asta's most important paper (and online version) is the Asta Herald. The same company also owns the most popular television channel. About two years ago, a reporter for the Herald started a series of articles about adolescence. The first stories were somewhat sensationalist focused on stories of 10 year-old girls having their first periods. They tried to link it to an agricultural chemical factory operating in the suburbs. But the national University's leading professor of pediatrics pointed out that now about 30% of girls in rich countries enter puberty by the age of 8 so there was nothing unusual in many girls having menarche (first period) by the age of 10. It was indeed a sign that child health had improved. Then a psychiatrist pointed to a paper from Finland suggesting girls who had early puberty were more likely to use drugs and alcohol at an early age, and to a paper from Denmark, which suggested that girls who had early puberty were more likely to get bulimia or anorexia.

This led the reporter to start more serious investigation. She started to look at all sorts of aspects of puberty and adolescence. She reported that work from the USA showed that brains did not fully mature until the third decade and because the last parts of the brain to mature were those associated with judgement, this explained risk taking behaviour in adolescence. Research from New Zealand reinforced this finding, pointing out that risk-taking behaviour was an evolutionary norm in young people.

The reporter went on in her series to explore how young people formed social relationships including how many friends they had on Facebook, how honest they were with their parents about their activities on line. At this time, several girls were admitted to hospital having taken overdoses of paracetamol – fortunately, none died. The reporter then appeared on TV and claimed that having interviewed the parents of some of these children, it appeared that each of these girls had been body-shamed by their friends via Instagram in the days prior to their overdosing.

At about the same time the police became aware that more and more young people were being found in bars below the legal age. Indeed in the holiday season at the end of the school year, hospitals were reporting admitting drunk adolescents; boys more commonly than girls. Letters to the editor argued this was the downside of so many foreigners 'invading' Asta. A populist politician from the nationalist party striving to get selected as party president picked on this and started rhetorically claiming that the influx of foreigners were breaking up family structures (divorce rates had increased over the last two decades), that they were bringing drugs and alcohol into a milieu which previously had not heavily used them, and that they were undermining traditional values. This outburst led to an outbreak of bullying of foreigners in several secondary schools. Some of these children had refused to go back to school. The parents of these children went to the media to show the horrific threats that had been made to some of the children. The Ministry of Education had responded by expelling two boys who had been identified as bullies, but the parents insisted that many more youth were involved.

The Herald decided to start a series of articles written by young people. One widely read article published on the editorial page said “old people did not understand young people, all old people wanted are more money for their retirements, while we, the young generation, are more concerned for our futures – climate change is threatening that and the government are doing nothing - we are scared”.

Letters flooded into the Herald – ‘young people have it lucky’, ‘they have lots of choices in their lives’, ‘all young people want is to be celebrities or influencers rather than really work’, ‘young people need to get real and contribute properly to our society’, “we should reintroduce national service”. A retired psychologist wrote an op-ed saying social media had created a race of narcissists - all under the age of 25.

At this time, the Department of Public Health in Asta University published the results of their wellbeing survey. It suggested that there were increasing rates of mental ill-health in people under the age of 25 over the past decade. The Minister of Health claimed, in response to questions, that the survey was totally flawed and the Ministry’s own data did not support this. However, despite requests from the media, no official data was provided. So then the Asta Herald searched corners reports and pointed out that in the past two years more than 50 young men had committed suicide by jumping in front of underground trains. They said this seemed to be a high rate by international standards. The government insisted that these were not high rates: rather that other countries under-reported suicides for religious reasons, and anyhow there were sufficient mental health services as evidenced by the fact that waiting lists for psychological services were not long. The professor of psychiatry responded in the media that psychiatric services were indeed underfunded and the reasons for short waiting lists was because people, especially young people, feared the stigma of being termed mentally ill. It would affect their social lives and reduce their chances of getting into a good university or a high paying job. The Prime Minister entered the argument by saying that young people just needed to ‘grow up’ and he announced a \$40 million initiative to build better faculties at sporting clubs and that if young people joined these, they would be better people.

The Medical Division of the Academy of Freudania decided that addressing the issue of youth mental health was a priority. They established a panel to explore the factors involved.

How would you structure and compose that report?

One Year Later

The report seems to have no response.

The Prime Minister's nephew, aged 19, commits suicide by jumping in front of an underground train in Besta, Freudian's second city of 2 million people. Now, the Prime Minister had a personal interest in what was going on. The media is all over it. **What should the academy do now?**



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