

“Every girl child should be given an education that prepares her to face a difficult, competitive, and stress-filled environment.”

Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras fmm shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on girl child education

Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras fmm, took office as the eighth Principal of Stella Maris College on May 1, 2008, after serving as Vice-Principal of the College for over three years. She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Computer Applications from Stella Maris College and an MS Degree in Computer Science from Marquette University, USA. She has an M.Phil. Degree and a doctorate in Mathematics from the University of Madras.

Dr. Quadras holds several expert and advisory positions in various academic bodies in the country. She has been the Member-Coordinator of several NAAC Peer Teams which has assessed and accredited several colleges across the country. She has also been a Member of the UGC Expert Committees to evaluate the UGC XI Plan requirements to consider proposals for grant of financial assistance to colleges, for minor research projects, and evaluating proposals for autonomous status of higher education institutions. She is on the Board of Research Studies of the University of Madras, a member of the University Senate and of Governing Bodies of several institutions of higher education.

Dr. Quadras was the only Indian academician and administrator of a college to be selected for a three-tier leadership programme titled “Leading Catholic Universities in the 21st Century” organised by the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), France, during the period 2012-2013. In 2015 she was elected Vice President (Asia) of IFCU at the 25th IFCU General Assembly held in Melbourne, Australia. She has received several awards for her services in the field of education. To name a few: The “Best Principal Award”—“Sigaram Thotta Penmani” and was the recipient of an award jointly given by Deakin University and Education Matters for her “on-going commitment and dedicated service to education.” In 2016 she was conferred the status of “Honorary Citizen of the Great State of Nebraska,” USA, by the Nebraska Secretary of State in the course of an exchange programme—“South Asia Women in College Administration”—at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras is also an active researcher. She was the Principal Investigator for a UGC Major Research Project, the first of its kind in Stella Maris College. She has published a book titled, *Embeddings and Interconnection Networks*, and more than 30 research articles in peer reviewed international journals. She has guided both M.Phil. and Ph.D. scholars and convened international conferences, seminars and workshops.



In an exclusive interview, Sr. Jasintha Quadras shares with Marie Banu her thoughts on girl child education.

What are your thoughts on girl child education today?

Every girl child should be given an education that prepares her to face a difficult, competitive, and stress-filled environment. Education is not just the conferment of certificates which recognises academic accomplishment. True education is the process which enables the person to develop intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally in a trajectory that will help him/her become well balanced individuals, capable of taking responsible action, being socially aware, and a citizen of the world. The education of young women, to empower them with a whole person education that will enable them to take on challenges of a complex social milieu is our mission.

Can you discuss the issues faced by first generation learners and students from marginal sections of the society? What are the steps taken by Stella Maris College to tackle them?

Young women, entering the portals of an institution of higher education at the age of 17 or 18 are confronted with multiple challenges, not the least, the problems arising out of having to cope with rigorous academic schedules, and a completely new environment.

Given that our policy is to admit students from marginalised sections and first generation learners, a major hurdle for them when they enter college is lack of

expected levels of competence in English. To add to this, is the sense of alienation they feel because of the new environment, and the difficulties they face in coping with the rigorous demands of the system.

We have established two unique support systems for such students so as to enable a smooth transition from school to college. The Stella Maris Pathway Programme emphasises the overall development of these students from the first year onwards through training in life skills, employability skills and computer skills right through their three-year undergraduate programme. They are also given English language skills to bring them on par with the rest of the student community. The training sessions are handled by experts from within the institution and outside.

The Language Partnership Programme follows up with a focussed English Language Skills training programme through their first year of college. This is a peer-led training programme, where senior students who have the requisite proficiency in English teach small groups of 12 to 15 students who need the extra coaching.

Remedial coaching and tutorials take care of the other academic needs of students. These are conducted by the respective departments. All newly enrolled students undergo an orientation programme over one week on various aspects of college life. Senior students take them on a guided tour of the campus. This serves two purposes: familiarising new students with the layout of the campus as well as creating bonds of friendship between the seniors and juniors.

Stella Maris is also concerned about the mental health of its students. Counsellors are accessible at our campus extension centre, SMC DRIVE, for those who need psychological support. Our faculty are also trained in counselling skills.

Social and cultural compulsions, in conflict with personal and other factors lead to confusion, stress and tensions. Some cope, while others need help. Issues arising due to diversity in culture and language, lead to identity crises and affects some students. To deal with these issues, we have a well established mentoring system in place. Every student is assigned a faculty mentor who meets her mentees periodically to monitor and track her progress and advice and counsel her when need be. Mentees are free to meet their mentors whenever they feel the need.

The Students' Union is encouraged to organise programmes that are inclusive and celebrate diversity in positive ways. They do their best to ensure that almost every student has some role to play in the

various events they organise.

Can you tell us about the “green policy” adopted by Stella Maris College?

Adopting environment-friendly initiatives on a continual and sustained basis is the focus of our policy. The College constantly seeks to promote the care of Mother Earth in keeping with the spirit of St. Francis, the Patron Saint of Ecology and of the religious congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. Therefore, one of the primary objectives of the institution is to sensitise students on environmental issues and to motivate them to promote ecological justice and sustainable development.

As a College administered by a Catholic religious congregation, it is but natural that the Franciscan charism of our patron, St. Francis of Assisi permeates its ethos and worldviews. Concern for Mother Earth, the environment, flora and fauna is embedded in the educational systems, processes and activities of the institution.

Tree planting supported by CSR industry, water harvesting, using organic manure, developing composting pits, recycling grey-water for watering plants, lighting the campus with solar panels, providing solar powered hot water systems for hostels and convent, adopting “Green Chemistry” by the Department of Chemistry, using simulation for practical application and reducing use of live animals by the Department of Zoology—are some of our sustainable, environment-friendly initiatives.

Being the first educational institution to conduct a Social Audit, what has been the key findings?

Overall, we are well on our way to achieving our mission objectives which is: To empower young women to face the challenges of life with courage and commitment, to be builders of a humane and a just society, and to promote a learning community in which all, especially those from less-privileged backgrounds, feel part of the collaborative high quality educational process which is value based and leads to holistic growth.

It was significant that our alumnae gave high ratings to all the key values. The curriculum was rated quite high, with the focus on a liberal education approach to education to create “well-rounded” individuals.

The social audit has given us insights into our relevance and reason to exist and has given us additional motivation to continue our mission to be builders of a just and humane society.