



***As Sonia steps down from her role as Head of College at UWC Mostar, she reflects on a journey filled with support, gratitude, and personal growth. While handing over the leadership to Hendrik, she looks forward to reconnecting with the community in a new capacity, carrying forward her dedication to the mission of UWC Mostar.***

**What do you consider your most significant accomplishments during your time at UWC Mostar?**

One of the key areas I'm proud of is the improvement of the student experience, especially focusing on wellbeing and safeguarding. We enhanced the living conditions for students by improving residences, food in the canteen, and creating more study spaces, such as the Velić student lounge in the attic and dedicated study areas in every residence. We've also focused heavily on mental health and support by increasing our psychologist and alumna Jelena's role, from volunteering, to part-time, and then to full-time. This change has allowed us to offer more substantial support to our students. Furthermore, our safeguarding policies have been strengthened, with all staff signing a confidentiality agreement at the start of each academic year, which helps students feel more comfortable sharing their concerns. I will also mention the Outdoor program, an opportunity for both staff and students to stay in touch with nature while socializing

---

**What is one of your most memorable experiences at UWC?**

There are many memorable moments, but one that stands out was when I was a teacher and the students organized an event to raise awareness about LGBTQI+ issues. It was completely student-driven, and they called it something like "Q the Spotlight." It included exhibitions and performances, and it was incredibly well done. I remember walking through the exhibition and feeling goosebumps, thinking, "These students are capable of so much..." The spirit of the students here always excites me, it is their dedication that really makes everything worth it.

---

**How have you grown personally during your time at UWC, and what are your future plans?**

I've had the unique opportunity to experience the school from many different perspectives: as a teacher, as a staff representative on the board, as part of the leadership team, and then as a head. This has given me a 360-degree understanding of how a school functions. I also worked closely with the International Office, leading the mental health and wellbeing group. It's helped me understand how the UWC movement works, how to balance different aspects of school life, and what's important in the context of the people and the culture I'm surrounded by. This journey has been a deeply rewarding learning experience. In the future I hope to continue to contributing to education in some way- if possible in a UWC. I also to want to focus on my health much more in the years to come.

---

**How has UWC Mostar impacted the local community and educational sector?**

UWC Mostar has made significant strides in its presence and outreach, especially in the local community. Our students now regularly engage in Project Weeks in local schools, which has helped strengthen our relationships with the surrounding area. We've gained recognition for this work, with local schools inviting us back year after year. Additionally, the mayor has been welcoming our Year 1 students at the city council, and the success of our community events, such as "Around the World in 80 Minutes,"

demonstrates the local support for our initiatives. UWC Mostar was also invited to coordinate the first Mostar Summer Festival, a great honor. On the educational front, we've revitalized our Teacher Training Programme and have been hosting workshops and webinars for teachers, not only from Bosnia and Herzegovina but also from other countries. These initiatives have had a significant impact on professional development in the region, and the feedback shows that our work is contributing positively to the local educational landscape.

---

### **What were some of the challenges you faced, and how did you address them?**

A major challenge was the school's budget. Salaries for international teachers were lower than those in other IB schools, which made it difficult to attract and retain staff. We overcame this by emphasizing the sense of community and the school's mission, which attracted teachers who were passionate about our values. Another challenge was the collaboration with local schools; while we made efforts, the response from some local schools was not as enthusiastic as we had hoped. Additionally, time constraints were a challenge, and I learned the importance of dedicating time for self-care to maintain efficiency and balance.

---

### **Looking back, is there anything you wish you had done differently?**

One thing I wish I had done differently was to learn the local language more thoroughly. I recognize that being persistent in learning the language would have helped me connect more deeply with the community. I hope to work on this now that I have more free time.

---

### **How do you envision the role of UWC Mostar internationally in the future?**

UWC Mostar has grown in importance within the UWC movement, especially due to its unique context in a divided city. Our participation in events like the UN "Transforming Education Pre-Summit" (we were the only UWC invited!) and other international conferences has also brought much recognition to the school, and we have consciously worked toward that. Last year we had the Delphi Economic forum where the Cypriot alumni and students were invited, along with UWC Mostar; specifically because of our context and mission. I know UWC Mostar will continue to be an example of how UWC schools can make a significant impact in challenging contexts.

---

### **What advice would you give to new HOC, Hendrik?**

I would advise Hendrik to focus on addressing the space challenges at the college; different classrooms can hold very different numbers of students. Besides the size, having designated classrooms for specific subjects would improve the teaching and learning experience, and could help organizing timetables more effectively. I also think we are in need a multipurpose hall; In the Spanish room we are often packed like sardines in a tin... You cannot engage so well and it would be better to have a larger room in case of emergencies. And of course, I advise Hendrik to - cherish this exciting time!

---

### **What role can UWC alumni play in raising the movement's visibility, especially in regions or communities where UWC is less well-known?**

Alumni are instrumental in raising UWC's visibility in regions where the movement might not yet have a strong presence. Simply by mentioning their UWC background in their professional and personal networks, alumni can help introduce UWC to new audiences. I've seen many alumni naturally act as ambassadors, sharing the values of UWC in their everyday conversations and showing the positive

influence that the movement has had on their lives. Some alumni take it even further by launching initiatives, such as supporting students in conflict zones or starting their own educational projects, which not only embody UWC's core values but also bring attention to the movement's global impact. These actions are powerful and effective in spreading UWC's message and inspiring others to join the mission, especially in regions where UWC might not be as visible.



***All UWCM alumni were invited to submit their questions for Hendrik Flier, our new Head of College, who joined UWCM in August 2022. We appreciate the thoughtful questions and invite you to read her answers below.***

---

**What inspired you to join the UWC movement?**

I first learned about UWC back in 2011 while working as a vice-principal at a grammar school in the Netherlands. Some of my colleagues had children attending UWCs, and they were also part of the selection committee in the Netherlands. That's how I became familiar with the movement. It sparked my curiosity, and I found the mission and vision of UWC quite inspiring. From that point on, I dreamed of one day having a job within the UWC community. After moving to the Middle East with my wife, I kept an eye out for opportunities at UWCs. Eventually, an opening came up at UWC China, so I applied, got the job, and the rest is history.

---

**How does working with UWC students differ from working with students in other schools?**

Students are students, regardless of background, but there are differences, especially when it comes to the environment and the level of responsibility. In a national curriculum school, the atmosphere is more recognizable, and the relationship with students reflects the society they come from. In an international school, like UWC, there is a more dynamic climate. Students tend to have a lot of personal responsibility, which gives a unique vibe to the school.

---

**How has your living experience in Mostar been?**

Living in Mostar has been a rewarding experience. I enjoy playing football with locals outside the UWC community, which helps me unwind. My wife and I also love exploring the city, its culture, and enjoying time together through dinners and short getaways. However, living abroad comes with challenges, like being far from family and friends, which can feel isolating. My wife and I believe it takes at least two years to truly settle into a new place. If you're still not happy after that, it might not be the right fit. Regarding language, I started Bosnian courses but struggled to stay motivated as most of my work is in English. I've faced similar challenges in previous international experiences, where the language barrier made it harder to practice regularly.

---

**What is your vision for the future of UWC Mostar, and how do you see your role in shaping it?**

UWC Mostar started as a temporary project and has evolved into a strong institution with a sustainable future. Now it's about long-term planning; especially regarding facilities and infrastructure, ensuring we're prepared for the next 5, 10, or 15 years. I hope UWC Mostar will be recognized as a valued partner both locally and internationally, collaborating with local institutions not from an authoritative position,

but as a collective that learns and contributes together to improving education in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the long run, I want UWC Mostar to be seen as a proud institution within the UWC movement—one that other schools look to for how we've worked with limited resources to create a thriving community and is respected for its commitment to the mission.

Communication will also be key, especially as we continue to engage with parents, the community, and alumni in a meaningful way. I'm excited about ongoing projects, like securing better facilities and launching an impact study. The upcoming 20th anniversary is also a huge milestone, and it's an honor for me to be the Head of College during this time. While I prefer staying out of the limelight, I'm excited about the direction we're headed and the continued growth of UWC Mostar. I look forward to shaping its future alongside the dedicated team and students.

---

**What initiatives or programs do you think could help strengthen the connection between current students and UWC alumni?**

One initiative that could greatly strengthen the connection between current students and UWC alumni is to institutionalize regular alumni talks and events. For instance, having structured alumni sessions every few weeks or months on various topics would create a consistent opportunity for students to engage with alumni. These events don't always need to be large-scale; the value isn't necessarily in the number of attendees but in the quality of the interactions. Smaller, intimate groups can often lead to more meaningful conversations. Additionally, creating spaces where students can interact with alumni in more informal settings, such as mentorship programs or networking events, could further foster these relationships.

Another potential initiative would be developing alumni-led workshops or panels on relevant topics, such as career advice, global challenges, or personal experiences that align with the UWC values. This would not only connect students with alumni but also allow alumni to pass on their wisdom, which can be incredibly impactful. Encouraging alumni to visit the campus, participate in events, and even provide virtual check-ins would help keep this connection alive and integrated into the community.

---

**In what ways do you believe alumni can actively contribute to the ongoing development of UWC and its values?**

Just like with parents, I often think of alumni as "critical friends". Alumni, with their experience and distance from the day-to-day operations, can provide valuable feedback on how the school is evolving. Engaging alumni in open, honest discussions about the challenges facing the school—both internally and externally—can help identify areas for growth. Their experiences in the world after UWC provide a unique perspective that can help guide the school's development.

Alumni inspire future generations of students showing how upholding our values translates into action in the real world. We are proud every time an alumni story is shared because it is an example of UWC's long-term impact and its mission to make education a force to unite people, nations, and cultures for peace and a sustainable future.