



**EUROPEAN SPORT
SAFEGUARDING EDUCATION
AND PROMOTION ACTION**

ESSEPA SURVEY ANALYSIS



Research and Survey Context

This document is developed within **European Sport Safeguarding Education and Promotion Action (ESSEPA)** project, co-funded by the European Union (ERASMUS SPORT 2025). The ESSEPA project is implemented by a consortium of 10 partner organisations from 9 European countries, combining expertise in sport governance, safeguarding, fair play, research, technology, and event organization.

Project consortium

EUSA Institute, Slovenia

Dspot, Slovenia

University of Zagreb, Croatia

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

University of Hamburg, Germany

European Fair Play Movement, Belgium

Albanian University Sports Federation, Albania

Portugal University Sport Federation, Portugal

University Sports Federation of Liechtenstein, Liechtenstein

University Sports Centre of Salerno, Italy

The main aim of the ESSEPA project is to strengthen safeguarding in university sport by developing an innovative online education and certification platform that would equip student-athletes, coaches, officials, and volunteers with knowledge and tools to prevent misconduct, promote ethical values, and foster a safe sporting environment.

To bridge existing information gaps regarding safeguarding awareness, structural mechanisms, and stakeholder needs across diverse European systems, ESSEPA launched a comprehensive multi-stakeholder survey. The resulting dataset establishes a robust evidence base to directly inform the project's subsequent educational and certification tools.

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1. ESSEPA PROJECT SURVEY

Context

As part of the European Sport Safeguarding Education and Promotion Action (ESSEPA), a comprehensive survey was conducted to gain a better understanding of safeguarding practices and experiences within university and higher education sport across Europe.

Given the considerable differences in safeguarding systems between countries and institutions, there is currently limited evidence on the level of awareness, existing mechanisms, and specific needs of stakeholders involved in university sport. To address this knowledge gap and support the development of evidence-based educational resources and practical interventions, ESSEPA launched a survey targeting individuals engaged in higher education sport in various capacities.

The survey was open to students, staff members of higher education institutions, coaches, instructors, referees, supervisors, volunteers, and other individuals involved in university sport, including both active participants and those performing organisational, educational, or supervisory roles. The findings provide an important evidence base for the project's subsequent activities, particularly the development of safeguarding education and certification tools tailored to the realities of university sport.

Methodology

A cross-sectional online survey was conducted as part of the ESSEPA project between 10 April and 10 June 2026. The questionnaire was carried out using the Google Forms platform and was open for a two-month period, allowing participants from different countries and institutional contexts to take part.

The survey adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative questions. This approach made it possible not only to collect factual and measurable data on safeguarding awareness, experiences, and existing mechanisms, but also to provide respondents with opportunities to share personal experiences, perceptions, and additional insights in their own words.

The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions and required approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. It was designed to capture information on respondents' profiles, their understanding of safeguarding, their experiences within university sport, and their perceptions of existing safeguarding mechanisms and needs.

Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and anonymous. No personally identifiable information was collected, thereby ensuring confidentiality and encouraging respondents to provide open and honest responses, particularly on potentially sensitive topics.

The survey was disseminated by all project partners through their respective digital communication channels and professional networks, including institutional mailing lists, websites, newsletters, and social media platforms. This dissemination strategy aimed to reach a broad range of stakeholders involved in university and higher education sport, including students, coaches, referees, university staff, volunteers, and sport administrators across participating countries.

Summary

This survey gathered 240 valid responses across 19 countries to map safeguarding awareness, experiences, and mechanisms in European university sport. While 80% of respondents generally feel safe during university sports events, a clear divergence exists between overall safety perceptions and lived realities: 14% of participants reported experiencing psychological violence, and 8% faced institutional pressure to train or compete through injury.

Furthermore, critical systemic communication gaps were identified; only 48% of respondents definitively know who to contact to report an incident, and 50% remain unsure if their institution has an active safeguarding policy or code of conduct. Stakeholders demonstrated an overwhelming interest (79%) in completing further safeguarding training, expressing a distinct preference for hybrid or in-person delivery models focused heavily on abuse recognition, relational boundaries, and mental health support.

2. SURVEY RESULTS

Participation and respondent profiles

A total of 240 valid responses were collected through the survey, representing participants from 19 different countries, comprising 18 European countries (Figure 1). This broad geographical reach provides a diverse and valuable evidence base, reflecting experiences and perceptions from a wide range of university sport contexts across Europe.

The survey achieved extensive geographical coverage, with responses originating from Southern Europe, Western Europe, and the Western Balkans. Southern European countries accounted for the largest share of responses, with Portugal, Albania, and Greece emerging as the three most represented countries. Although the distribution of responses varied across countries, the survey succeeded in reaching stakeholders from different regions of Europe, thereby strengthening the representativeness and relevance of the findings.

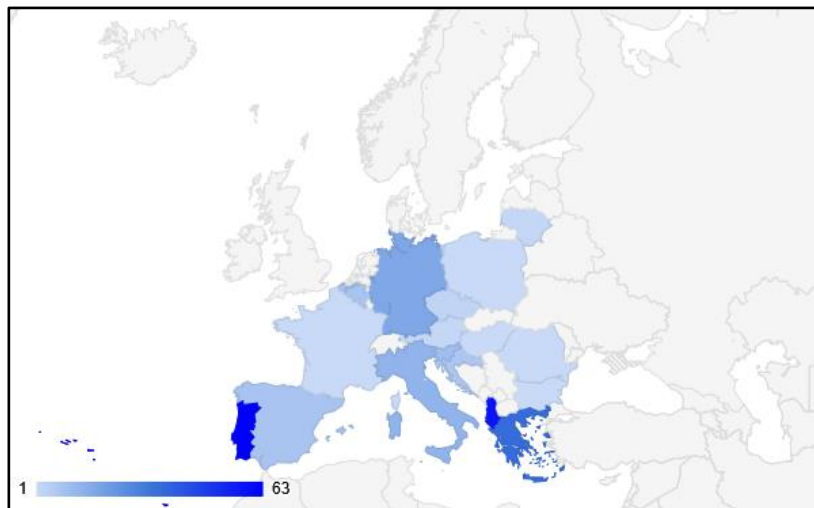


Figure 1: Map of participants from geographical coverage

Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 78 years old, demonstrating that safeguarding concerns are relevant across different generations involved in university sport. Nevertheless, the sample was predominantly composed of younger participants, with the majority of respondents falling within the 18 to 25-year-old age group.

This age distribution is consistent with the strong representation of students within the survey population (Figure 2).

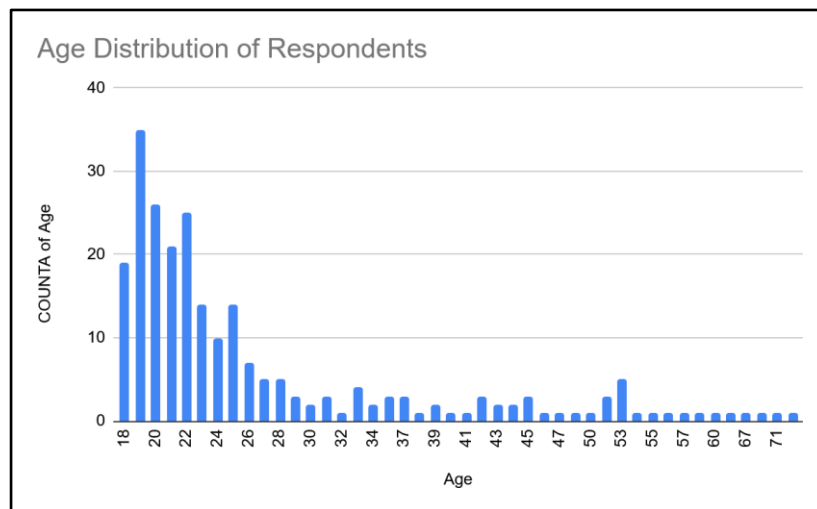


Figure 2: Age distribution of respondents

In terms of gender, the respondent pool was relatively balanced, comprising 51% women and 48% men, while 1% of respondents identified with a diverse gender category, or chose not to disclose it. The near parity between male and female respondents provides a balanced perspective on safeguarding issues and reduces the risk of findings being overly influenced by one gender group (Figure 3).

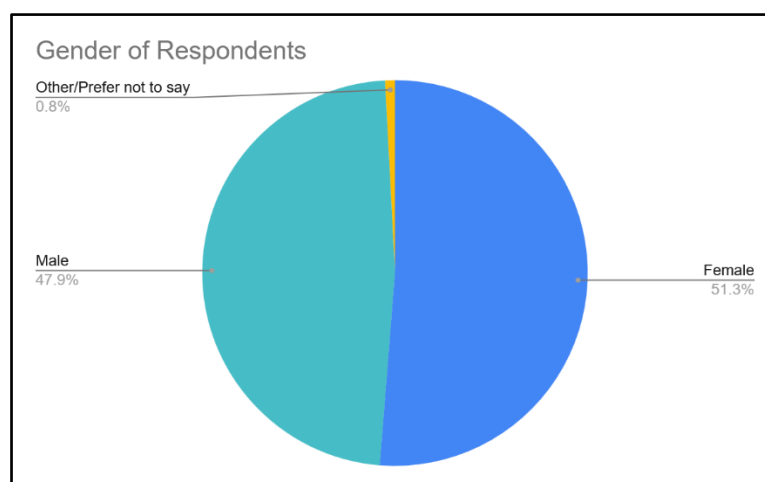


Figure 3: Respondents' gender distribution

The survey successfully reached the diverse stakeholder groups targeted by the ESSEPA project. Respondents represented a variety of roles within university sport, and some individuals reported holding multiple roles simultaneously.

The most represented group was students, accounting for 62% of respondents, followed by employees of higher education institutions (14%). Other respondent profiles included officials, coaches, volunteers, and referees, illustrating the multi-stakeholder nature of university sport and ensuring that the survey captures perspectives from both participants and those involved in the organisation, management, and delivery of sporting activities (Figure 4).

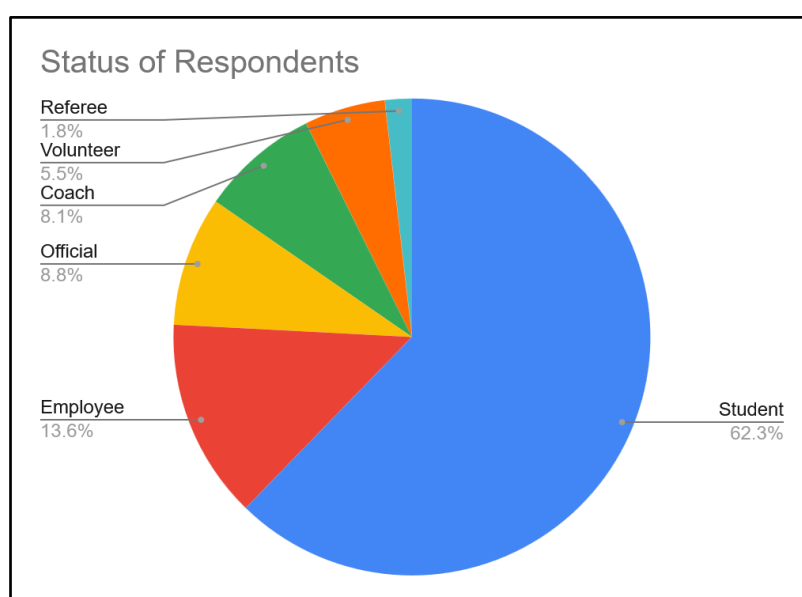


Figure 4: Status of respondents

The sports formats represented in the survey are largely characterised by activities involving significant levels of participation and interaction. National competitions account for the largest share of responses (30%), followed by events (20%), while international competitions and sports trips each represent 12% of the reported formats. This suggests that many respondents are involved in settings that bring together large numbers of participants, often from different institutions, regions, or countries.

Such environments can present specific safeguarding considerations due to the diversity of participants, the intensity of interactions, and the organisational complexity associated with large-scale sporting activities. Although smaller-scale formats such as fun tournaments and fitness activities are also represented, the findings indicate that large sporting events and competitive settings constitute an important part of the respondents' sporting experience and therefore provide a particularly relevant context for exploring safeguarding issues (Figure 5).

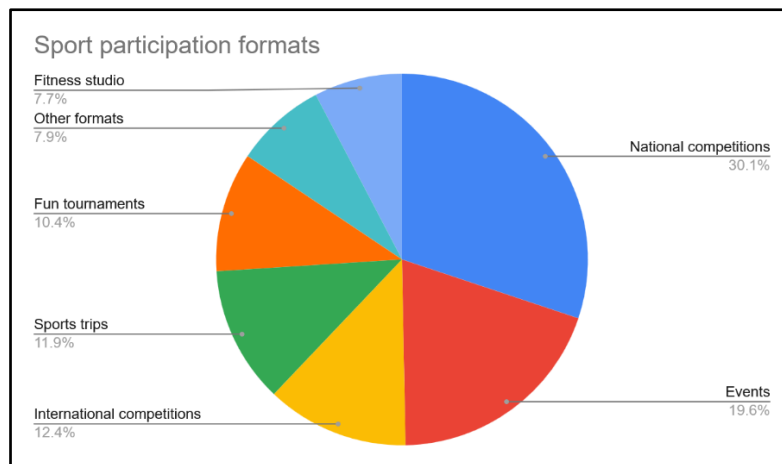


Figure 5: Sport participation formats

The respondents represent a wide variety of sports disciplines, reflecting the diversity of university sport across Europe. Team sports constitute the largest group of activities reported in the survey. At the same time, the participation of individuals involved in a broad range of other sports demonstrates that the survey captures experiences from diverse sporting contexts, thereby enriching the analysis of safeguarding needs and practices across different settings (Figure 6).

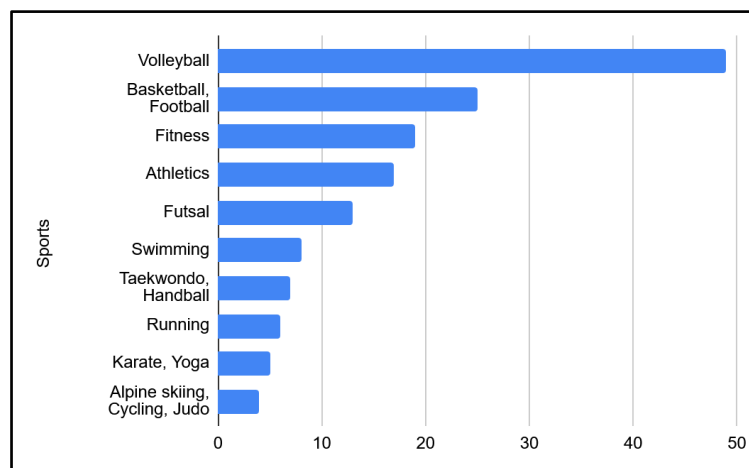


Figure 6: Sports among respondents

Overall, the respondent profile indicates that the survey achieved its objective of engaging a broad and diverse audience, providing a solid foundation for understanding safeguarding awareness, experiences, and needs within the university sport sector.

Awareness and understanding of safeguarding

When asked whether they had heard the term "safeguarding in sport" prior to the survey, respondents demonstrated varying levels of familiarity with the concept. Overall, 41% reported being familiar with the term, while 28% had heard of it but did not fully understand its meaning. Notably, nearly one-third of respondents (31%) indicated that they had never heard the term before (Figure 7).

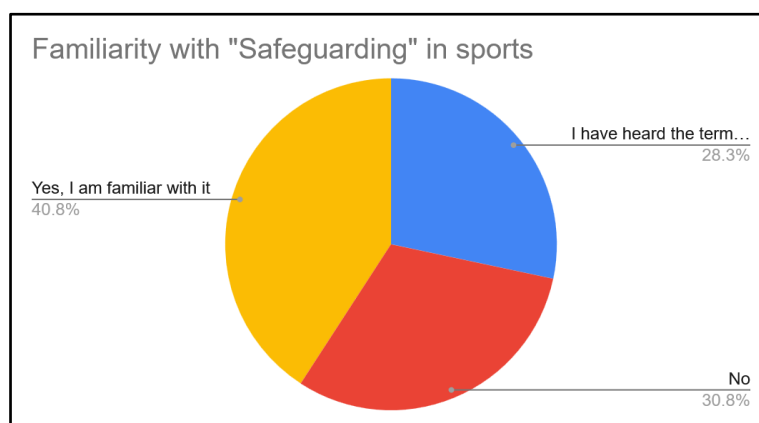


Figure 7: Familiarity with the term "Safeguarding" in sports

These findings suggest that, although safeguarding is already recognised by a significant proportion of stakeholders involved in university sport, awareness and understanding remain uneven. The fact that 59% of respondents either had no prior knowledge of the concept or only a partial understanding highlights an important need for further awareness-raising and educational initiatives across the higher education sport sector.

Some differences also emerge when analysing responses by gender. Among men, 46% reported being familiar with the term "safeguarding in sport", compared with 36% of women and respondents identifying with a diverse gender category. Conversely, women and gender minorities were more likely to indicate that they had heard the term without fully understanding it (33%, compared with 23% of men). The proportion of respondents who had never heard the term remained relatively similar across groups, at around 30%.

While these differences should be interpreted with caution, they suggest that familiarity with safeguarding terminology may vary across demographic groups and reinforce the

importance of ensuring that safeguarding concepts and educational resources are communicated in an accessible and inclusive manner.

Respondents generally report a high level of perceived safety when participating in university sport events. A clear majority (60%) indicate that they feel very safe, while a further 20% report feeling somewhat safe. Overall, this means that four out of five respondents (80%) express a positive perception of safety in this context (Figure 8).

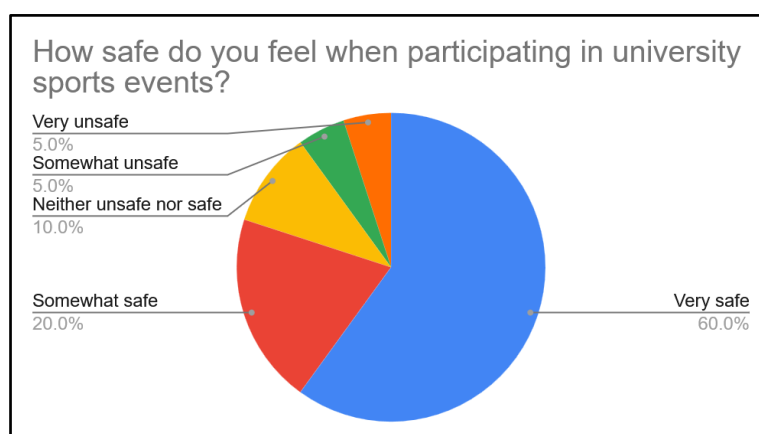


Figure 8: *Safety perception at university sport events*

In contrast, a smaller proportion of respondents report neutral or negative perceptions. Around 10% state that they feel neither unsafe nor safe, while 5% report feeling somewhat unsafe and a further 5% very unsafe.

Taken together, these results suggest that university sport environments are broadly perceived as safe by participants. However, the presence of a minority of respondents reporting uncertainty or discomfort indicates that safeguarding experiences are not entirely uniform and that further efforts may be needed to ensure consistently safe environments for all participants.

No significant differences were observed across gender groups, with only minor variations in response patterns, suggesting broadly shared perceptions of safety regardless of gender.

While respondents generally reported relatively high levels of perceived safety in university sport environments, as previously noted, knowledge of formal safeguarding reporting pathways appears more uneven.

When asked whether they know who they could report a safeguarding concern to within their university or sport organisation, just under half of respondents (48%) answered yes. In contrast, 31% stated that they were not sure, while 21% reported that they do not know who to contact in such situations. These findings suggest that, although many participants feel safe, a significant proportion lack clarity regarding the practical mechanisms available to act on safeguarding concerns (Figure 9).

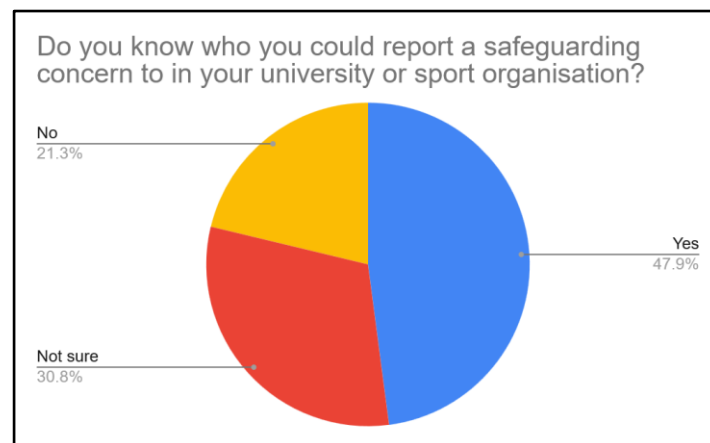


Figure 9: Reporting mechanism awareness at universities

A gender-based breakdown reveals additional nuances. Women and those identifying with a diverse gender category report lower levels of awareness, with approximately 10 percentage points fewer indicating that they know who to report a concern to compared with men. This indicates a gap in awareness of reporting structures among these groups, which may have implications for accessibility and confidence in using safeguarding mechanisms.

Overall, the results point to a potential disconnect between perceived safety and procedural knowledge, highlighting the importance of strengthening communication around reporting channels within university sport environments.

Experiences at universities

Building on the analysis of awareness and perceptions of safety, the following section turns to respondents' lived experiences within university sport environments.

When asked **whether they had personally experienced any forms of inappropriate or harmful behaviour in their sport environment**, the largest proportion of respondents (41%) reported no experiences of the listed forms of violence or misconduct. Initially, these figures seem to suggest that a significant share of participants have not been directly exposed to transgressive behaviours in their sporting contexts.

However, the remaining responses indicate that such experiences are nonetheless present across multiple forms. Psychological violence is the most frequently reported issue (14%), followed by pressure to train or compete despite injury (8%). Other reported experiences include neglect (7%), physical violence (7%), discrimination (6%), and bullying or exclusion by teammates (6%). Smaller but still notable proportions of respondents also reported sexual harassment (4%), online violence (2%), hazing or initiation rituals (2%), and sexual abuse (1%). A small share of participants (2%) preferred not to answer (Figure 10).

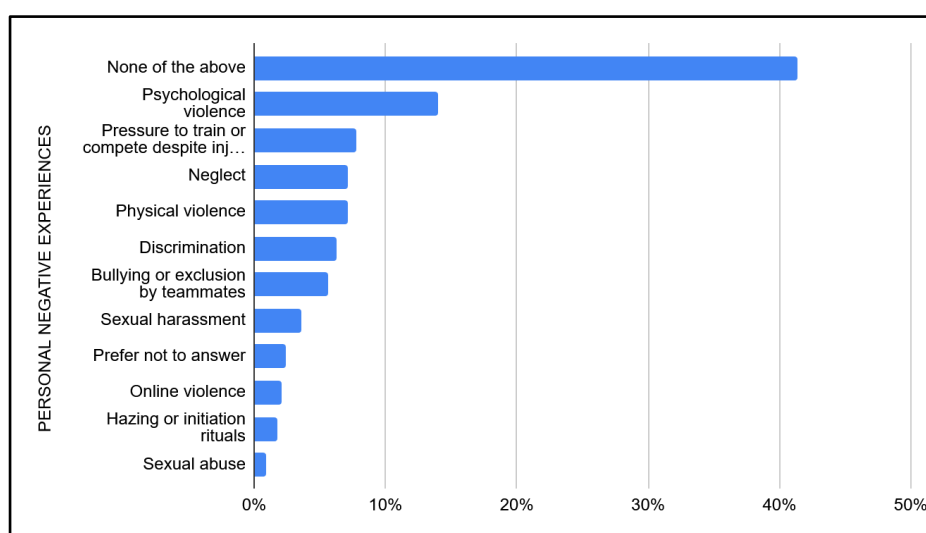


Figure 10: Personal negative experiences in the context of university sports

Cumulatively, these findings show that while non-exposure is the most common response, a substantial proportion of respondents report having experienced at least one form of transgressive behaviour. This indicates that safeguarding concerns in

university sport are multifaceted and extend beyond isolated incidents, encompassing a range of psychological, physical, relational, and structural issues within sport environments.

Moreover, when respondents were asked to **identify the individuals involved in situations of harmful or violent behaviour**, coaches emerged as the most frequently reported actors, followed by teammates and opponents. Staff members were mentioned less frequently, while parents or spectators represented the smallest proportion of reported cases.

When examining the **frequency of exposure to different forms of harmful or violent behaviour in university sport environments**, the results show that the majority of respondents report no experience of such situations across all categories.

For physical violence, 77% of respondents indicate that they have never experienced it, while 12% report a few occurrences (2–4 times), 9% report a single incident, and 2% report experiencing it many times (5 or more). A similar distribution is observed for psychological violence, although with a slightly higher level of exposure: 62% report never having experienced it, 15% report a few occurrences, 15% a single incident, and 8% multiple occurrences.

Sexual violence is reported at much lower levels overall, with 89% of respondents indicating no experience. A small proportion report having experienced it once (5%) or a few times (5%), while only 1% report repeated exposure (5 or more times). Neglect follows a comparable pattern, with 72% reporting no experience, 13% a few occurrences, 11% a single incident, and 4% multiple occurrences.

Overall, while most respondents report no direct exposure to the listed forms of harmful behaviour, the presence of reported incidents across all categories indicates that such experiences are not absent from university sport environments. In particular, psychological violence appears comparatively more prevalent than other forms, suggesting it may represent a more persistent area of concern within the safeguarding landscape (Figure 11).



Figure 11: *Personal violence exposure experiences*

A gender-based analysis of exposure to different forms of violence reveals both common patterns and some notable differences across respondent groups.

Psychological violence emerges as the most prevalent form of harm and appears relatively consistent across genders. While slightly higher proportions of male respondents report experiencing psychological violence “a few times” or “many times”, the overall distribution remains broadly comparable between men and respondents identifying as women or gender minorities. This suggests that psychological violence represents a shared concern across all groups, regardless of gender.

In contrast, physical violence shows a slightly higher prevalence among male respondents. Men are more likely to report experiencing physical violence at least once or on multiple occasions compared to women and gender minorities, among whom higher proportions report never having experienced this form of violence.

More marked differences appear in relation to sexual violence and neglect. Respondents identifying as women or gender minorities report higher levels of exposure overall, particularly in terms of experiencing neglect and repeated incidents of sexual violence. Male respondents, by comparison, are more likely to report never having experienced sexual violence, although a small proportion still indicate isolated or repeated incidents (Figure 12).

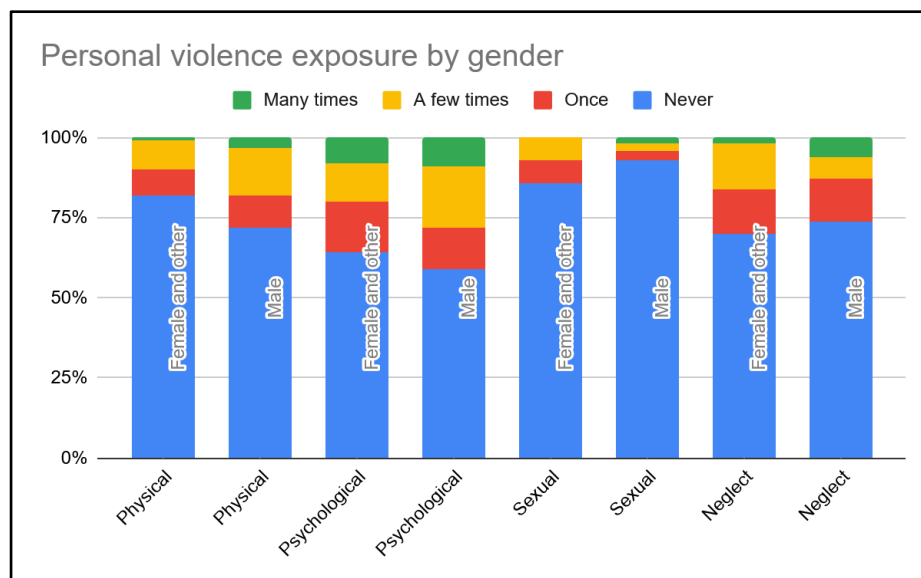


Figure 12: *Personal violence exposure by gender*

Overall, these findings suggest that while psychological violence is widely experienced across all groups, gendered patterns emerge in relation to other forms of violence, with women and gender minorities appearing more exposed to neglect and sexual violence. These results underline the importance of considering intersectional dynamics when addressing safeguarding risks in university sport environments.

Importantly, these findings should also be read in relation to earlier results on perceived safety, where a large majority of respondents reported feeling “very safe” or “somewhat safe” in university sport contexts. The coexistence of relatively high levels of perceived safety with the reported prevalence of different forms of harmful experiences suggests that feelings of safety do not necessarily exclude the presence of violence or inappropriate behaviours. This highlights a potential gap between general perceptions of safety and lived experiences, reinforcing the need for continued attention to both subjective perceptions and actual incidents within safeguarding frameworks.

When asked whether they would know what steps to take if they experienced or witnessed violence or inappropriate behaviour in sport, respondents show a mixed but overall moderately positive level of procedural awareness. Nearly half of respondents (47%) report that they would know clearly what to do, while 35% indicate that they would know somewhat, and 18% state that they would not know what steps to take (Figure 13).

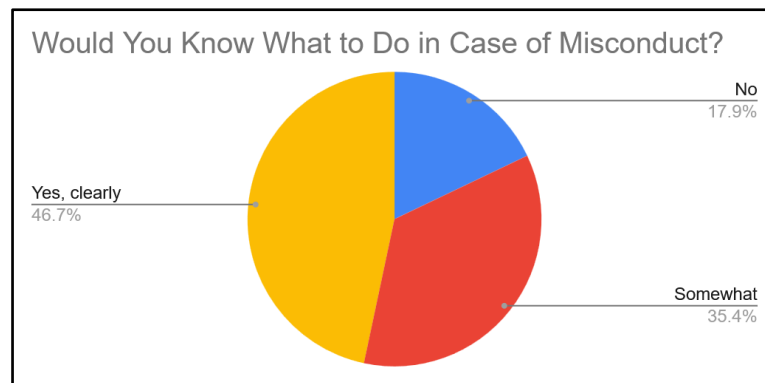


Figure 13: Awareness of reporting procedures following incidents of violence

A breakdown by role highlights noticeable differences across stakeholder groups. Among students, 42% report knowing clearly what to do, compared to 36% who are somewhat unsure and 21% who do not know. In contrast, respondents in coaching, officiating, or employee roles demonstrate higher levels of clarity, with 59% reporting clear knowledge of reporting steps, 33% somewhat aware, and only 8% indicating that they would not know what to do.

In summary, the findings suggest a progressive variation in procedural awareness, with non-student stakeholders appearing more confident in navigating reporting processes than students. While awareness is relatively widespread, a significant proportion of respondents across groups still report uncertainty, indicating room for further strengthening of guidance and communication around reporting procedures.

When asked **how they would likely respond if a teammate disclosed that they were experiencing abuse**, respondents indicate a strong inclination toward supportive and action-oriented behaviours. Nearly half of respondents (49%) report that they would encourage the teammate to report the situation, while 32% state that they would speak directly to a coach or staff member. A smaller proportion (16%) indicate that they would report the situation themselves, and only 4% report that they are not sure how they would respond.

Overall, these findings suggest a generally proactive attitude among respondents when faced with peer disclosure of abuse, with most indicating that they would take some form of supportive or reporting-related action rather than remaining passive. The results also highlight that responses tend to favour indirect reporting pathways (encouraging disclosure or involving staff) more than direct reporting by the respondent.

A slight difference emerges when comparing stakeholder groups, with students being somewhat more likely than employees and coaches to report uncertainty (“I am not sure”), although this remains a minor proportion overall. This may indicate differences in familiarity with institutional procedures and confidence in handling safeguarding disclosures.

When asked about **potential barriers preventing athletes from reporting safeguarding concerns**, respondents identify a combination of personal, institutional, and cultural factors. The most frequently cited barrier is fear of negative consequences (24%), followed by the belief that nothing will change (21%). Other important factors include lack of trust in the system (16%) and not knowing where to report (15%), indicating both confidence-related and information-related gaps in reporting structures (Figure 14).

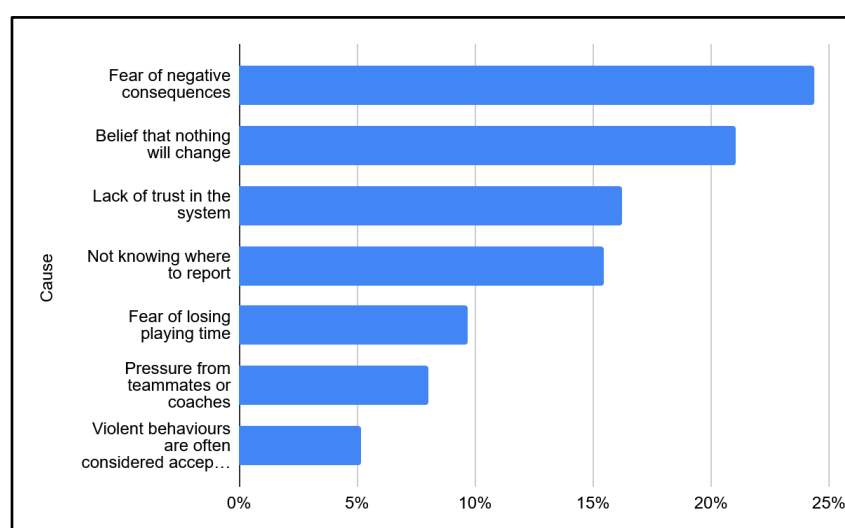


Figure 14: Barriers to reporting transgressive behaviours

Additional barriers are also reported, albeit less frequently, such as fear of losing playing time (10%) and pressure from teammates or coaches (8%), highlighting the influence of sporting hierarchies and team dynamics on reporting behaviour. A smaller proportion of respondents (5%) also point to the perception that violent behaviours are often considered acceptable in sport settings, suggesting that cultural normalization of certain behaviours may still persist.

Overall, these findings suggest that barriers to reporting are multifaceted, combining fears of personal repercussions, limited trust in safeguarding systems, and structural or cultural factors within sport environments.

When asked **whether their organisation has a safeguarding policy or code of conduct**, respondents show a relatively low level of certainty regarding existing institutional frameworks. While 40% report that such a policy is in place, half of the respondents (50%) indicate that they are not sure, and 10% state that their organisation does not have one.

Overall, these results suggest that although safeguarding policies may exist in many organisations, awareness and visibility remain limited. The particularly high proportion of “not sure” responses is notable, as it suggests a lack of clarity about whether such frameworks are in place, pointing more towards an awareness or communication gap than necessarily an absence of policies.

This widespread ambiguity highlights an information gap, which consequently informs the next section examining safeguarding mechanisms in more detail.

Safeguarding mechanisms at universities

When asked **whether safeguarding is adequately addressed both publicly and within the university environment**, respondents express a generally critical but nuanced assessment. Only 24% consider that the topic is completely adequately addressed, while 34% feel that it is addressed to some extent but could be much more emphasized. In contrast, a significant proportion of respondents express more negative views, with 28% stating that safeguarding is addressed very little and 15% reporting that it is not at all addressed (Figure 15).

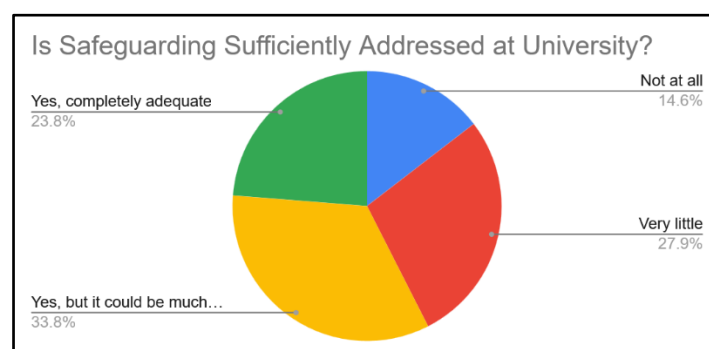


Figure 15: *Opinion on awareness-raising on safeguarding at universities*

Overall, these findings suggest that while safeguarding is present in public and institutional discourse, it is perceived by many respondents as insufficiently visible or not sufficiently prioritised. The majority of responses indicate a clear expectation for greater emphasis and stronger integration of safeguarding topics within the university sport environment, highlighting an important area for further development in awareness-raising and institutional communication.

When asked **whether sufficient prevention measures are taken by event organisers and supervisors to minimise misconduct**, respondents generally acknowledge the presence of preventive frameworks, while also expressing some variability in their perceived effectiveness.

Across responses, several recurring types of measures are highlighted. The most frequently mentioned include the establishment of clear rules of conduct and codes of behaviour, often communicated to participants prior to events. Respondents also point to pre-event briefings and the provision of information, aimed at setting expectations and promoting appropriate behaviour in advance. In addition, visible supervision and the presence of staff or security personnel during events are commonly cited as key preventive elements. Some respondents specifically mention the existence of dedicated “awareness teams” or “trust people” deployed across event sites, which are described as strengthening participants’ sense of safety and trust by ensuring that support is visibly accessible on the ground.

When considering responses to incidents of misconduct, participants similarly report the presence of structured support mechanisms once issues occur. These include immediate intervention by supervisors, direct communication with those involved, and referral to appropriate safeguarding or equality officers. Respondents also highlight the availability of reporting channels, disciplinary procedures, and follow-up processes, as well as, in some cases, access to psychological support. In addition, several responses emphasise the role of staff in actively encouraging individuals to speak up and in addressing situations in a calm and confidential manner.

Taken together, these findings suggest a relatively coherent safeguarding framework combining prevention, visible presence, and reactive support mechanisms. The perceived effectiveness of these measures appears closely linked to their visibility and

immediacy, particularly the presence of identifiable safeguarding or “trust” personnel, which is associated with stronger feelings of reassurance and accessibility of support.

When asked **whether they had received additional information, training or seminars on preventing misconduct in sport**, respondents report a relatively mixed but generally present exposure to safeguarding education. Those who answered positively most frequently refer to seminars, workshops, and training sessions, delivered either in person or online. Other forms of exposure include presentations, guidelines and written materials, as well as awareness campaigns and social media-based information, indicating that safeguarding content is disseminated through multiple channels. Some respondents also mention participation in Erasmus+ projects, suggesting that European-level initiatives play a role in providing structured learning opportunities in this field.

Among those who reported having received training, the main providers are relatively balanced between institutions. Universities (37%) and sports federations (36%) represent the primary sources of training, followed by other providers (16%) and private organisations (11%). This distribution suggests that responsibility for safeguarding education is shared between academic and sport governing structures, with some contribution from external actors.

In terms of perceived quality, responses are overall moderately positive. A majority of respondents report being satisfied (44%) or very satisfied (23%), while 18% indicate a neutral position. Only a small proportion express negative evaluations, with 6% dissatisfied and 8% very dissatisfied.

These results suggest that while safeguarding training is generally well received, there remains room to strengthen both its reach and its perceived effectiveness across the university sport ecosystem (Figure 16).

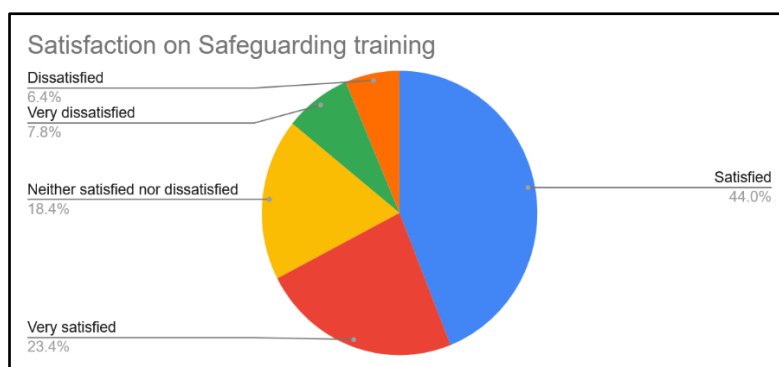


Figure 16: Level of satisfaction with the quality of the training on safeguarding

Interest in safeguarding education appears to be strongly established among respondents, particularly when considering their engagement with prevention and training topics discussed in the previous section.

A large majority of respondents (79%) indicate that they are generally interested in protecting themselves and others through such training. In contrast, 18% express no clear opinion, while only a very small proportion (3%) report no interest.

Overall, these findings suggest a high level of openness and willingness to engage with safeguarding-related learning. The results also point to a favourable context for the further development and dissemination of training initiatives, as most respondents already demonstrate a positive disposition towards strengthening their knowledge and skills in this area.

Building on the strong interest expressed in safeguarding-related training, respondents were also asked about their preferred format for such sessions.

A hybrid model emerges as the most preferred option, with 40% of respondents favouring a combination of digital and in-person formats. This is followed by 31% who prefer entirely in-person sessions, while 19% support an alternating approach between digital/hybrid and face-to-face formats. Only 10% of respondents indicate a preference for fully digital training.

Overall, these results suggest a clear preference for formats that retain a physical, in-person dimension, either exclusively or as part of a hybrid model. This emphasis on embodied and interactive learning environments highlights the perceived importance of direct exchange, presence, and engagement in safeguarding education, even as digital tools remain a useful complementary channel (Figure 17).

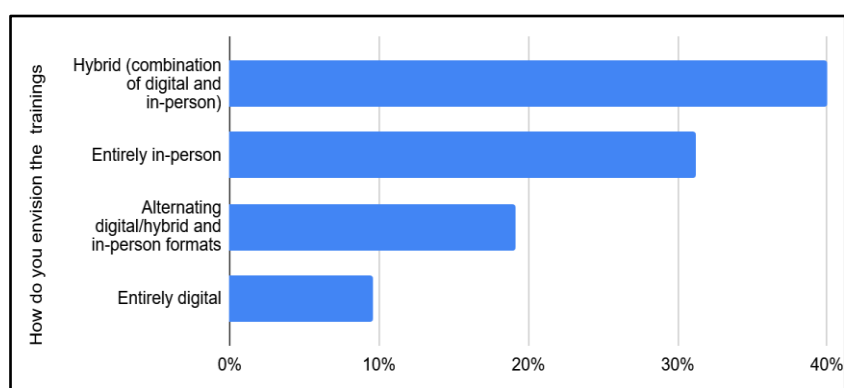


Figure 17: *Preferences on the organization of training sessions*

In terms of **content priorities**, respondents identify a set of recurring themes for future training. The most prominent topics include recognising different forms of violence and abuse in sport, alongside protecting athletes' mental health and well-being. Strong emphasis is also placed on safe coach–athlete relationships and professional boundaries, as well as preventing bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

Other key areas of interest include identifying warning signs that an athlete may be experiencing harm, creating respectful and inclusive team cultures, and supporting victims of violence or abuse. Respondents also highlight the importance of understanding how to respond to disclosures, clarifying safeguarding responsibilities within sport organisations, and strengthening knowledge of reporting procedures. Additional topics such as safe communication and social media use, as well as preventing hazing and initiation practices, are also mentioned, though less frequently.

Overall, these preferences point towards a demand for training that is both practical and applied, focusing on recognition, response, and prevention, while also addressing relational, cultural, and organisational dimensions of safeguarding in sport.

Building on respondents' **reflections on training needs and safeguarding priorities**, the final question explores the perceived obstacles that may hinder the effective implementation of safeguarding measures in university sport.

Respondents identify several interconnected challenges that hinder the effective implementation of safeguarding measures in university sport. The most frequently cited issue relates to a lack of awareness and understanding of safeguarding among athletes,

coaches, and staff. Closely linked to this is the insufficient provision of education and training, particularly in relation to recognising and responding to safeguarding concerns. Together, these two factors point to a broader gap in knowledge and capacity-building across the university sport ecosystem.

Another important set of challenges concerns organisational clarity, with respondents highlighting unclear policies, roles, and responsibilities within sport structures. This is complemented by concerns related to reporting systems, particularly the absence of clear or trusted mechanisms for raising safeguarding concerns.

Finally, respondents also point to deeper cultural barriers, including a sport environment that may normalise harmful behaviours or discourage reporting, suggesting that safeguarding challenges are not only structural or procedural, but also embedded within broader sport cultures (Figure 18).

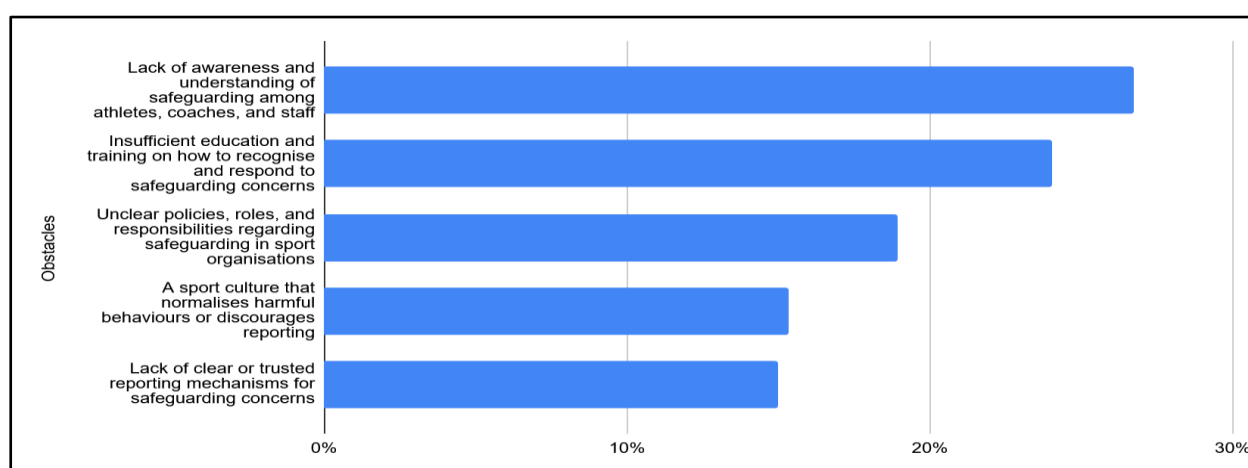


Figure 18: Main challenges to implementing effective safeguarding measures

Overall, these findings indicate that the main barriers to effective safeguarding are multi-layered, combining issues of awareness, education, governance clarity, reporting infrastructure, and underlying cultural norms.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

The survey highlights a university sport environment across Europe where perceived safety is generally high, yet safeguarding awareness, visibility, and consistency remain uneven. Most respondents report feeling safe when participating in sport activities; however, this perception coexists with the reported presence of psychological violence, neglect, discrimination, and other forms of inappropriate behaviour. This duality points to a gap between perceived safety and lived experiences that warrants further attention.

Awareness of safeguarding is present but not fully consolidated. A substantial proportion of respondents demonstrate limited understanding of the concept, and procedural knowledge remains partial, with many unsure of reporting pathways or uncertain about the existence of safeguarding policies within their organisations. This suggests that, while safeguarding frameworks may exist, they are not always clearly communicated or sufficiently embedded in participants' everyday sporting environments.

The findings also reflect the multi-stakeholder nature of university sport, with both students and sport professionals (including coaches, officials, referees and employees) represented in the sample. Differences between these groups are evident, particularly in relation to procedural awareness, with professionals generally reporting greater clarity regarding reporting mechanisms, although gaps remain across all categories.

The survey reveals a consistent pattern in which high levels of perceived safety coexist with the continued presence of harmful experiences within university sport environments. While most respondents feel safe, incidents of psychological violence, neglect, discrimination, and other forms of inappropriate behaviour are still reported across the sample, indicating that safety perceptions do not necessarily reflect the full complexity of lived experiences.

At the same time, safeguarding awareness remains partial and uneven. Although many respondents are familiar with the concept, a significant proportion report limited

understanding or lack prior exposure. This is further reflected in procedural knowledge, where only around half of respondents clearly know how to report a safeguarding concern, and many remain uncertain about institutional policies or reporting pathways.

Training and information on safeguarding are available but not consistently accessible across all respondents, despite a strong expressed interest in further education and capacity building in this area. This uneven exposure contributes to differences in awareness between stakeholder groups, with students generally reporting lower levels of procedural knowledge compared to coaches, officials, and staff, although gaps persist across all categories.

The data also highlight a set of structural and cultural barriers that continue to affect safeguarding implementation, including fear of consequences, lack of trust in systems, unclear procedures, and the normalization of certain harmful behaviours within sport environments. Alongside this, respondents express a clear preference for practical, applied training delivered through hybrid formats combining digital and in-person learning.

Taken together, these findings underscore the need to move beyond the mere existence of safeguarding frameworks towards their effective communication, consistent implementation, and meaningful integration into the everyday reality of university sport. Strengthening clarity, accessibility, and engagement across all stakeholder groups remains essential for the development of safer and more supportive sport environments in higher education.

4. ANNEX

ESSEPA Survey

The European Sport Safeguarding Education and Promotion Action (ESSEPA)

Dear Participants of the ESSEPA Project Survey,

Thank you for taking the time to answer the following questions. The survey will take no longer than 10 to 15 minutes and helps us gain insights into the experiences of students and staff at universities regarding protection and safety in university sports. The ESSEPA project aims to strengthen safeguarding in university sports by developing an innovative online education and certification platform. The focus is on protection from forms of interpersonal violence in sport: physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, and neglect. We respond to the urgent need to equip students, athletes, coaches, officials, and volunteers with knowledge and tools to prevent misconduct, promote ethical values, and create a safe sporting environment.

All data will be processed anonymously.

Thank you for participating in this brief reflection!

ESSEPA is co-funded by the European Union. Views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EU or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

Age**Gender**

Female

Male

Diverse

Prefer not to say

Status

Student

Employee

Coach

Referee

Volunteer

Official

Country of study/residence

In which formats do you participate in university sports at your institution?

Recreational sports courses

Fitness studio

Fun tournaments

National competitions

International competitions

Events

Sports trips

Other formats

What sport do you practice?

How safe do you feel when participating in university sports events?

Very unsafe

Somewhat unsafe

Neither unsafe nor safe

Somewhat safe

Very safe

Have you ever personally experienced any of the following in your sport environment?

Physical violence (e.g., being hit, pushed, kicked, or physically punished during training or competitions)

Psychological violence (e.g., being shouted at, humiliated, threatened, or repeatedly insulted)

Sexual harassment (e.g., sexual jokes or comments about your body, inappropriate messages, unwanted touching or attention)

Sexual abuse (e.g. being pressured, manipulated, or forced into unwanted sexual activity or sexual contact)

Neglect (e.g., not receiving appropriate care, supervision, medical attention, or support when injured, unwell, or in distress)

Pressure to train or compete despite injury (e.g., being told to play through pain or injury, or criticised for wanting to rest or recover)

Bullying or exclusion by teammates (e.g., teasing, spreading rumours, deliberate exclusion from team activities or social groups)

Hazing or initiation rituals (e.g., being forced to perform embarrassing tasks, drink alcohol, or undergo humiliating team initiation activities)

Discrimination (e.g., unfair treatment based on gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or background)

Online violence (e.g., being harassed, threatened, humiliated, bullied, or sent inappropriate messages through social media, messaging apps, or other digital platforms)

None of the above

Prefer not to answer

Who was involved in the situation as the person displaying the harmful or violent behaviour?

Coach

Teammate

Opponent

Staff member

Parent or spectator

Other

How often have you personally experienced the following forms of harmful or violent behaviour in your sport environment?

Physical violence

Never (0 times)

Once (1 time)

A few times (2–4 times)

Many times (5 or more times)

Psychological violence

Never (0 times)

Once (1 time)

A few times (2–4 times)

Many times (5 or more times)

Sexual violence (sexual harassment or/and abuse)

Never (0 times)

Once (1 time)

A few times (2–4 times)

Many times (5 or more times)

Neglect

Never (0 times)

Once (1 time)

A few times (2–4 times)

Many times (5 or more times)

If you experienced or witnessed violence or inappropriate behaviour in sport, would you know what steps to take?

Yes, clearly

Somewhat

No

If a teammate told you they were experiencing abuse, what would you most likely do?

Encourage them to report it

Speak to a coach or staff member

Report it myself

Do nothing because it is not my responsibility

I am not sure

Do you know who you could report a safeguarding concern to in your university or sport organisation?

Yes

No

Not sure

What might prevent athletes from reporting safeguarding concerns?

Fear of negative consequences

Lack of trust in the system

Not knowing where to report

Belief that nothing will change

Pressure from teammates or coaches

Fear of losing playing time

Violent behaviours are often considered acceptable in sport setting

Other

Before this survey, had you heard the term “safeguarding in sport”?

Yes, I am familiar with it

I have heard the term but do not fully understand it

No

Safeguarding in sport refers to policies, practices, and procedures designed to prevent different forms of violence and to ensure that sport participation takes place in a safe, respectful, and supportive environment for all participants.

Does your organisation have a safeguarding policy or code of conduct?

Yes

No

Not sure

Do you feel that the topic of safeguarding is adequately addressed publicly and within the university environment?

Yes, completely adequate

Yes, but it could be much more emphasized

Very little

Not at all

Do you feel that sufficient prevention measures are taken by the event organizers and supervisors ahead of the events to minimize misconduct?

If yes, in what way?

Do you think the organizers or supervisors provide adequate support if misconduct occurs?

If yes, in what way?

Have you received additional information, training or seminars on preventing misconduct?

If yes, in what way?

If Question before is yes, who provided and conducted the training?

Sports federation

University

Private provider

Others

How satisfied were you with the quality of the training?

Very dissatisfied

Dissatisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Satisfied

Very satisfied

Are you generally interested in protecting yourself and others through such training?

Yes

No

No Opinion

Who do you believe would be the most suitable provider for such training?

Sports federation

University

Private provider

Other

How comprehensive do you think these training sessions should be to properly address the topic?

How do you envision the organization of these training sessions?

Entirely digital

Entirely in-person

Hybrid (combination of digital and in-person)

Alternating digital/hybrid and in-person formats

Would you participate in a free online training on safeguarding in university sports?

Yes

No

Depends on

No opinion

Safeguarding education typically covers several competency areas (recognition, prevention, response, reporting, and culture). Thus, it would be useful that response list reflects key thematic domains of safeguarding education in sport.

Which topics related to safeguarding in university sport are most important to you?

Recognising different forms of violence and abuse in sport

Understanding athletes' rights and safeguarding principles

Safe coach–athlete relationships and professional boundaries

Preventing bullying, harassment, and discrimination in sport

Recognising warning signs that an athlete may be experiencing harm

How to respond when an athlete discloses a safeguarding concern

Reporting mechanisms and procedures for safeguarding concerns

Creating a respectful and inclusive team culture

Preventing hazing and harmful initiation practices

Protecting athletes' mental health and well-being

Safe communication and use of social media in sport

Responsibilities of coaches, officials, and sport organisations in safeguarding

Supporting victims of violence or abuse in sport

Risk prevention during travel, competitions, and training environments

In your opinion, what are the main challenges to implementing effective safeguarding measures in university sport?

Lack of awareness and understanding of safeguarding among athletes, coaches, and staff

Insufficient education and training on how to recognise and respond to safeguarding concerns

Unclear policies, roles, and responsibilities regarding safeguarding in sport organisations

Lack of clear or trusted reporting mechanisms for safeguarding concerns

A sport culture that normalises harmful behaviours or discourages reporting

Others

If you would like to follow the progress of the project, we invite you to subscribe to the newsletter via our website: <https://essepa.eusa.eu>

Thank you very much for your participation — you have contributed to creating a safer environment in university sports!



EUROPEAN SPORT
SAFEGUARDING EDUCATION
AND PROMOTION ACTION

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SPIRIT OF
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