

ESSEPA research illustrates the current state of safeguarding in university sport

The research reveals a paradox: while the frameworks often assume safety, participants on the ground report a fragmented system with unclear reporting and gaps.

LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA, July 14, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The European Sport Safeguarding Education and Promotion Action ([ESSEPA](#)) project, co-funded by the European Union, has finalized the core research phase of its mission to transform athlete welfare in higher education area. By publishing comparative policy analysis and its multi-stakeholder survey results, the project has mapped out the gaps and lived experiences of safeguarding in university sport across Europe.

The research reveals a paradox: while administrative frameworks often assume safety, participants on the ground encounter a fragmented system with unclear reporting pathways and unaddressed vulnerabilities.

Phase 1: State of play and analysis of existing policies

The first phase of the research mapped the existing legal structures and policies across nine European countries. Here are the key findings:

- Fragmented landscape: Safeguarding is rarely integrated into university-specific sports frameworks. Instead, institutions rely on general, non-sport-specific disciplinary codes or broad



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RESEARCH REPORT
ON SAFEGUARDING
POLICIES

ESSEPA SURVEY
ANALYSIS



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ESSEPA research

ethical guidelines.

- Policy vacuums: Most partner countries suffer from a lack of dedicated safeguarding policies and appointed safeguarding officers exclusively for university sport.
- Off-field vulnerability: While direct competition environments tend to be regulated, off-field contexts, such as athlete travel and overnight stays, often remain uncovered by active safeguarding protocols.

Phase 2: Stakeholders survey

To capture the real-world experiences behind these policy gaps, the ESSEPA consortium launched a survey. Based on responses from 240 respondents across 19 countries, including student-athletes, coaches, administrators and volunteers, here are the key findings:

- The safety paradox: While 80% of participants reported feeling generally safe during events, 59% indicated they had personally experienced at least one form of transgressive or inappropriate behaviour in their university sports environment.
- Prevalent misconduct: Psychological violence (14%) and institutional pressure to train or compete through injury (8%) emerged as the most common negative experiences, with coaches and teammates identified as the primary actors.
- Lack of awareness: Deep communication gaps persist. Half (50%) of respondents were unsure if their institution has an active safeguarding code of conduct, and only 48% knew who to contact to report an incident.
- Reporting barriers: When asked what prevents athletes from speaking up, the top barriers cited were fear of negative consequences (24%), the belief that nothing will change (21%), as well as lack of trust in the system (16%).

The path forward: from insights to action

Despite the barriers, the survey proved that the university sports community is eager for change: 79% of respondents expressed an overwhelming desire for safeguarding training, with a clear preference for interactive, hybrid learning models.

These cumulative findings provide a vital empirical foundation for the next stage of the ESSEPA project: developing an innovative, digital safeguarding education and certification platform. This educational curriculum will be directly tailored to the target audiences, preparing student-athletes, coaches, officials, and volunteers to recognize boundaries, protect mental health, and implement active reporting procedures.

The research is also actively guiding the ongoing evaluation and development of the [EUSA](#) Safeguarding and Incidents Policy, with the goal of establishing mandatory training, clear contact roles within teams, and standardized reporting procedures across all future European university sports competitions.

Access the Research: The full ESSEPA Research Report on Safeguarding Policies and the ESSEPA Survey Analysis Report are publicly available. For detailed findings, graphics, and resources, please visit the official project website at <https://essepa.eusa.eu>.

About the ESSEPA project

The ESSEPA project is a 24-month initiative co-funded by the European Union and coordinated by the EUSA Institute (Slovenia). The consortium brings together 10 partner organizations from 9 European countries, combining expertise in sports governance, safeguarding, fair play, research, technology, and event organization:

- 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)

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