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## UCT hosts largest global safe sport gathering on African soil



Professor Mosa Moshabela speaks to Associate Professor David Maralack on the sidelines of the Safe Sport 2026 Conference. Photo: Khaalid Mooradd.

More than 500 delegates from 87 countries gathered at the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 25 to 27 May 2026 for the Safe Sport 2026 conference, the most internationally representative gathering of the global safe sport movement to date.

Hosted at the New Lecture Theatre on upper campus, the hybrid conference marked the first-time ever the event has been convened on the African continent. Under the theme "Moving safeguarding from intention to implementation", the conference brought together researchers, policymakers, athletes, educators, safeguarding practitioners and sport leaders committed to strengthening athlete welfare and safer sport systems around the world.

Opening the conference, UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mosa Moshabela said the gathering presented an important opportunity not only to learn from international best practice, but

also to elevate African perspectives, scholarship and leadership in shaping the future of safe sport globally.

He said sport has the power to transform lives and create opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but only if sporting environments are safe and supportive.

“We know how important a career in sport can be in terms of a breakthrough for children, including young people who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, in terms of opening up a very important upward trajectory in sport,” he said.

“We have also seen it at UCT, where our sporting codes have allowed for some young people to enter into professional careers in sport, such as rugby and others, and compete at a global scale. However, we have to ensure that they are free from injury, abuse, harassment, exploitation and harm. We have to create a safe environment for them to be able to engage in sport. This is why this conference is very important.”

Professor Moshabela said UCT remains committed to advancing conversations around athlete welfare and recognising the role sport plays in society while confronting the difficult realities that continue to affect athletes worldwide.

“We hope that the conversations that took place here can be informed by the realities of the people on the ground. We hope that we can also make sure that these conversations do not just translate to positive policies but can translate into effective practice in order to ensure and safeguard the future of sport,” he said.

Conference organiser and Head of Department at the School of Management Studies, Associate Professor David Maralack, said the conference marked a defining step in UCT’s strategic commitment to becoming a platform for safe sport research, documentation and policy development.

“The university, being the top-ranked African university, recognises that the African continent and the broader Global South remain significantly underrepresented in safe sport scholarship,” he said.

“This gap has real consequences for athletes, officials, federations and communities navigating these issues without evidence-based guidance. Through rigorous, context-sensitive research and systematic evidence gathering, UCT aims to ensure that the lived experiences and challenges of athletes across Africa and the Global South are no longer invisible in global policy conversations, but instead drive meaningful action, shape responsive frameworks and influence sport governance at every level.”

Associate Professor Maralack said UCT aims to continue playing a role in advancing these objectives in close partnership with the African Union, as well as continental and global partners.

Over three days, delegates explored a wide range of issues affecting athletes and sporting communities globally. Key discussions focused on how research can drive safer sport systems, the intersection of safeguarding and inclusion, addressing mental health concerns in and through sport, safeguarding and anti-doping, and tackling trafficking through sport in Africa.

Sessions also examined the inclusion of women and girls with albinism in African sport, as well as strategies to end child sexual violence through integrated approaches involving research, survivor-led initiatives and practical safeguarding interventions.

Chief Executive Officer of Safe Sport International Neal Anderson said creating safer sporting environments requires sustained commitment, accountability and action.

“Safe sport does not happen by chance. It does not emerge from good intentions alone. It must be chosen, built, resourced and sustained. It requires values that are clear, leadership that is accountable, systems that are trusted, and cultures of safety that are lived every single day,” he said.

Reflecting on his experience coaching youth rugby, Anderson said sport can provide belonging, enjoyment and personal development when safety and dignity are prioritised.

“But we know that happens only where safety, rights, equity and justice are actively protected,” he said.

“When power is abused, dependency is exploited, boundaries are violated, or success is placed above people, sport can become a place of profound harm. Violence, harassment and abuse in or through sport is never acceptable. Safe sport is the only sport that matters,” he added.

Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Senior Safeguarding Manager Kathryn Leslie acknowledged the work of safeguarding officers and practitioners operating with limited resources across the world to make football safer for all participants.

“What is happening on the continent is a reflection of what is happening in the world,” she said.

“We are listening to all our member associations to improve what we do. We are continuing to try to improve ourselves while keeping an ear to the ground to ensure there is a sense of purpose, as we are committed to creating and sustaining safe sport.”

Leslie also acknowledged that age cheating remains a challenge in sport and said FIFA is working towards solutions. Delegates called for accountability measures that extend beyond athletes to include officials and coaches involved in enabling age fraud.

Regional Partnership Manager for Africa at World Rugby, Coralie van den Berg, said the conference came at a significant moment for rugby on the continent following Rugby Africa’s adoption of a continent-wide safeguarding policy and procedures earlier in 2026.

Adopted during Rugby Africa’s Annual General Meeting in Kampala in February 2026, the policy established harmonised standards across member unions to prevent and respond to abuse, harassment, neglect and exploitation in the sport.

“The adoption of a safeguarding policy was a critical milestone, but policies alone do not protect people – people do,” Van Den Berg said.

“This gathering is about building a trusted network of trained safeguarding focal points who can put the policy into practice and support one another to protect everyone involved in our sport.”

Van Den Berg said World Rugby has also made safeguarding training mandatory for everyone taking up roles within the organisation.

Senior Counsel at World Athletics, Catherine Pitre, said the federation introduced a safeguarding policy in 2023 that requires member federations to take ownership of their safeguarding responsibilities.

“We still have a lot of work to do in terms of adoption of policies and procedures to ensure that no complaint is left without a route through which to go and to be dealt with,” she said.

“At the moment, we have a little bit under half of our member federations in Africa still working on developing their policies and procedures. We are very fortunate to have about 15 of our member federations from Africa attending this conference. This will help them develop safeguarding in their countries.”

Pitre said growing interest in safeguarding had often been driven by scandals across various sporting codes, highlighting the urgent need for stronger protections.

“It’s very unfortunate that we have to wait for a scandal to take place for people to start caring about the well-being of athletes and everyone involved in sports,” she said.

“The good thing is that, although they are unfortunate circumstances, they are leading people to action and to ensure that there are mechanisms in place so that these issues do not arise again.”

At the conclusion of the conference, delegates collectively adopted a Safe Sport Principles Pledge aimed at strengthening accountability and safeguarding practices globally.

As the conference closed, delegates emphasised that safeguarding in sport can no longer remain an aspirational goal or policy discussion. Instead, they said, it must translate into practical action that protects athletes, builds trust and creates sporting environments where everyone can participate safely and with dignity.

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