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Academic Dropout among Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: A Bibliometric Study

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Abstract

Students with disabilities are more likely to drop out of school due to barriers to participation. The objective was to analyze the scientific output of academic dropouts among students with disabilities in higher education from 2005 to 2025. The bibliometric method, non-experimental and descriptive design was used. The search was conducted in Scopus and WOS with Boolean descriptors and operators. Data were exported in RIS format and imported into COVIDENCE for PRISMA: identification, screening, and inclusion, with eligibility criteria. Bibliometrix and VOSviewer were used. Scientific output has a growth rate of 14.5%, the most prominent author is Morina, the journals are Disability & Society, African Journal of Disability, and Educational Sciences; the affiliation is the University of Seville, and distribution is Spain, the USA, and the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, co-occurrence analysis found five clusters, and co-authorship networks reaffirm Morina's participation.

Keywords: *Academic Dropout, Disability, Students, Higher Education, Bibliometric Study.*

Introduction

According to statistics, up to 2018 the global participation of people enrolled in higher education reached 224 million, which represents a gross rate of 38%. (UNESCO, 2020) However, despite this expansion over the last 60 years, and although access to the third level of education has been established as a key human right and public good aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, serious problems of inequality that affect vocational training between groups and societies still persist. as a result of historical structural factors associated with "economic class, gender, minority status based on ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural or age characteristics, and disabilities". (UNESCO, 2022, p. 7)

In the case of students with disabilities, even when society is responsible for generating opportunities (Caiche and Guerrero, 2024) , since they are considered to be the vulnerable population "who have physical, mental, intellectual or sensory deficiencies", the statistics of the World Education Monitoring Report provided by the (Rodríguez & Vázquez, 2024, p. 4) UNESCO (2020) , estimate that, only around 10% of them can access higher education, while in Latin America the figure is between 2% and 5%. That is, most of them do not manage to train professionally,

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From this perspective, they argue that students with disabilities experience a greater probability of dropping out of school, given the prevalence of various barriers in their context that hinder full and effective participation. Among them, physical factors such as infrastructure and furniture that limit access to the institution's facilities, social factors such as exclusion from social, recreational and cultural activities, pedagogical factors that address the lack of an adequate curriculum, teacher training and insufficient support through adapted resources, and attitudinal factors that refer to adverse attitudes and behaviors towards these students, stand out. influencing the treatment and labor insertion in the future. Rußmann et al. (2024) (Carrillo et al., 2025) (Nieminen et al., 2025) (Nieminen et al., 2024) (Pérez, 2019) (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022)

Dropout, from the context of education, is the abandonment of studies, either forced or voluntary, which can be of a transitory or permanent nature due to various circumstances. It is also a persistent phenomenon, which is why it is considered one of the indicators of the effectiveness of the education system. In Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), (Castro & Machuca, 2023) (Parreño, 2023) high dropout rates are a major concern, due to their impact on both institutions and society in general (Martínez et al., 2023) (Quincho et al., 2024) .

The dropout indicator also allows us to question the conditions, methodologies, monitoring and guarantees that exist for the education of this group. In fact, it also assumes that society would not be responding to the three essential elements such as non-discrimination, zero rejection and reasonable accommodations, to guarantee the educational rights of people with disabilities. (UNESCO, 2020) Under this context, despite the growing interest in academic dropout in the context of disability in higher education students that has been provided in recent years, the application of bibliometric analysis to systematically evaluate scientific production is still limited.

According to , bibliometrics is used to quantitatively analyze data from previous studies through two categories: 1) scientific performance and 2) scientific mapping. Performance is focused on the contributions made by researchers, including indicators such as author, source, affiliation, and country, etc. Meanwhile, scientific mapping is related to these co-words and co-authorship contributions that facilitate the bibliographic and intellectual structure. Donthu et al. (2021)

In this sense, the objective of this research is to analyze the scientific production of academic dropout in students with disabilities in higher education from 2005 to 2025. To address this purpose, data from publications were collected and subsequently exported from the Scopus database and Web of Science to answer the following key questions:

1. What is the scientific performance of publications on academic dropout in students with disabilities in higher education?

2. What is the analysis of bibliometric networks in studies of academic dropout in students with disabilities in higher education?

3. What are the research gaps on academic dropout in students with disabilities in higher education?

This bibliometric analysis will provide valuable information for a clear understanding of the trajectory and general trends about academic dropout in students with disabilities in the field of higher education. In addition, it will make it possible to identify gaps in current knowledge and guide future lines of research to effectively address the issue in question.

Method

The present study was approached from the bibliometric method that analyzed bibliographic data quantitatively (Donthu et al., 2021) to offer a complete view of academic dropout in students with disabilities in higher education. The research design was non-experimental, since the variables were not manipulated, in addition, it had a descriptive scope, since its objective was the description of the phenomenon in the results.

The development of the research was delimited in five phases proposed by , that is, it had a logical, structured and systematic sequence. Phase I consisted of the search for the most relevant scientific literature of the last two decades through databases such as Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection (WOSCC), since both are multidisciplinary, in addition, they are recognized and used by the international academic community since they have citation indexes of the largest journals in the world. Del Bosque et al. (2025) (AlRyalat et al., 2019)

For this purpose, descriptors such as "Academic dropout", "Student dropout", "Students with disabilities" and "Higher education" were used, and Boléan operators such as "AND" and "OR" were used to ensure the breadth, restriction or definition of the search results. Table 1 details the search strategy used in each database.

Database	**Strategy**
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (" Academic dropout" OR "Dropout" AND "Students with disabilities" AND "higher education")
Web of Science Core Collectione (WOSCC)	((((((TS=(academic dropout)) OR TS=(student dropout)) AND TS=(students with disabilities)) OR TS=(disability in students)) AND TS=(higher education))

Board 1: Search Strategies

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the data provided by the databases in the advanced search.

Phase II consisted of the collection of data for its structuring, therefore, in this stage all the works on the subject of academic dropout in students with disabilities in higher education were collected, organized, selected and analyzed. The retrieved studies were exported in RIS format, and then imported into the COVIDENCE program, which allowed for an in-depth study of the content of all the documents using the PRISMA incorporated as a flow chart for review at three levels: (i) identification, (ii) screening, and (iii) inclusion, as shown in Figure 1.

Eligibility criteria for inclusion and exclusion were also considered in order to avoid data that could distort the results. In this sense, for the studies to be considered, the following requirements were met: Period from 2005 to 2020, Article type document, Open access, Search language in Spanish and English. Consequently, all those that did not meet these attributes were omitted.

In Phase III, the application of bibliometric techniques was considered to process the data retrieved and exported in CVS format from the COVIDENCE program, while in Phase IV the graphs of production trends were generated. In this process, bibliometric software tools such as the open-source Bibliometrix R package were employed for the elaboration of a wide range of quantitative analyses, with an emphasis on visual representation using graphs for a clearer understanding of the relationships and trends within the data. It was also complemented by the

VOSviewer program, which provided bibliometric maps of cocitations and co-occurrences (Sivaramakrishnan y Sridharan, 2025) (Huang et al., 2022) . And in Phase V, the key findings were synthesized in a clear and effective way, which made it possible to identify knowledge gaps in the literature for the suggestion of future lines of research.

Results

Figure 1 indicates that, at the identification level, a representation of 1,805 total studies was recovered: 1,731 in Web of Science and 74 in Scopus, subsequently, 68 were eliminated by the automatic and manual duplication technique. Meanwhile, the screening level involved a review of 1,737 records in two phases: screening of titles and abstracts and full-text screening to determine suitability based on relevance, for this reason, 8 were excluded in the former. From here, the dataset was refined to retain only the relevant ones and reject the ones that were unrelated. This exclusion process eliminated articles that did not meet the year of publication (486), documents that were not articles (282), that were not in English or Spanish (289) and those with restricted access (148). At the inclusion level, it was shown that the final dataset consisted of 524 papers for the bibliometric analysis of academic dropout in students with disabilities in Higher Education.

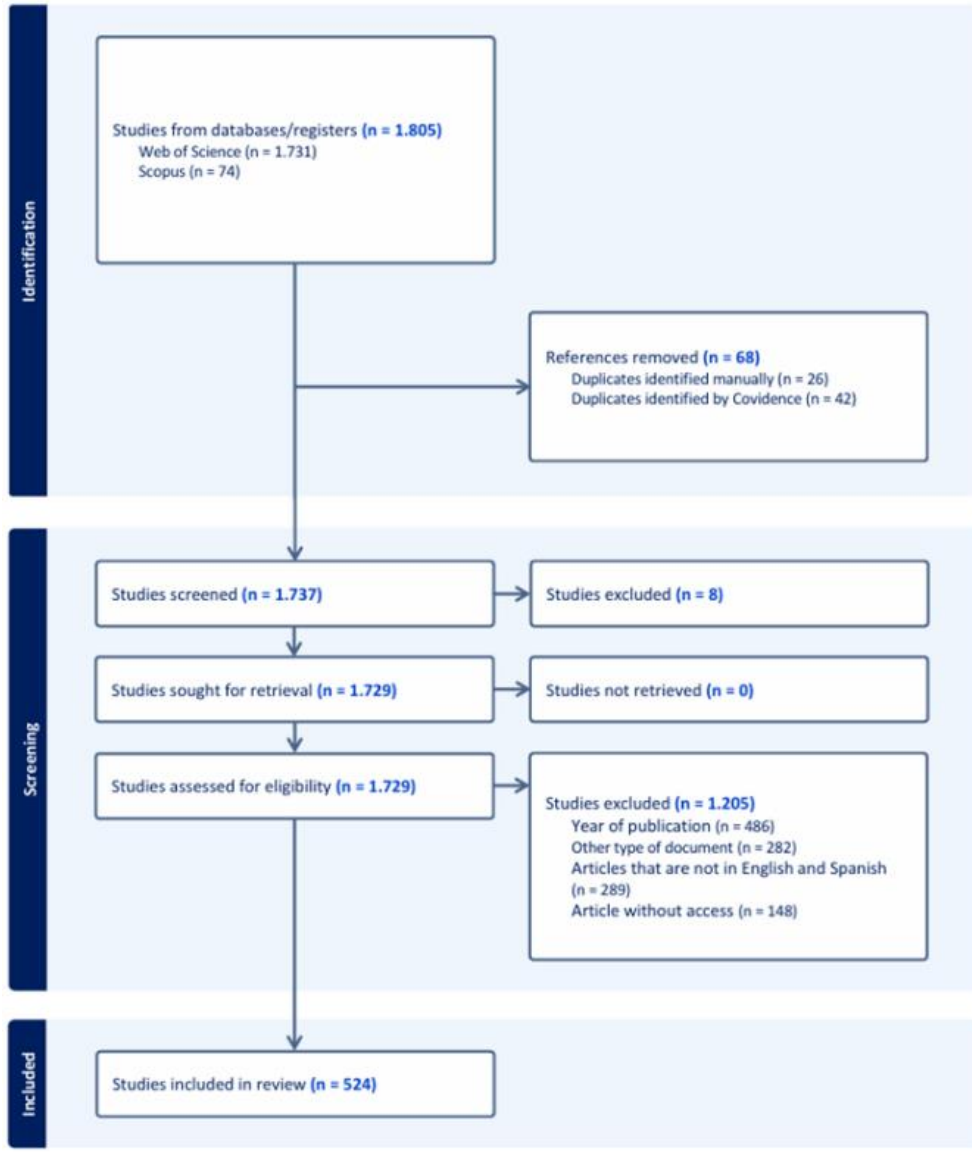

Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart of the Study Selection Process

Source: Diagram exported in COVIDENCE.

Scientific Performance of Publications

To analyze the scientific performance of publications related to academic dropout in students with disabilities, the annual scientific production, authors, sources, affiliations, and most relevant countries that have contributed during the last two decades were considered. It is detailed below:

Annual Scientific Production

Figure 2 shows a gradual and sustained growth in scientific production from 2005 to 2025 with

the presence of peaks for the most part. In this sense, an upward trend is observed, with a very pronounced increase from 2021 onwards. This finding indicates that the publication of articles has been increasing with an annual rate of 14.5%, which shows a positive and growing evolution of production over the course of the established period.

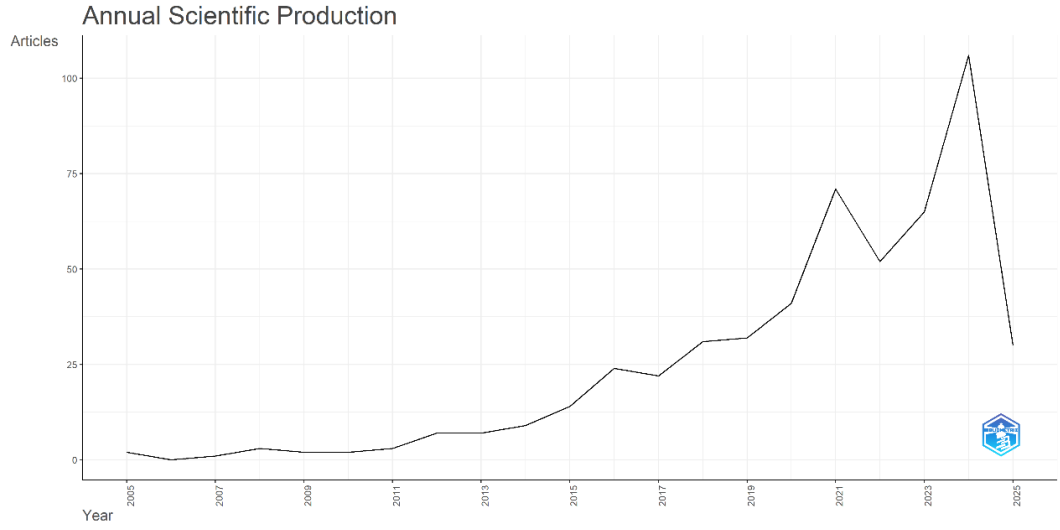

Figure 2: Annual Scientific Production Between 2005 And 2025.

Note. Extracted from Bibliometrix

Most Prominent Authors

Figure 3 details the ten most outstanding authors in terms of the number of associated articles, in which it is led by Morina A. with 24 publications, followed by Morgado B., Carballo R., Lopez-Gavira R., Orozco I. and Úbeda-Colomer J., each between 6 and 9, likewise, Devis-Devis J., Fernandez-Cerero J., Cotan F and Dollinger M., with 5 and 4 respectively. This finding made it possible to clearly identify the most active authors in the field of study, who may be useful for understanding the structure and dynamics of academic production.

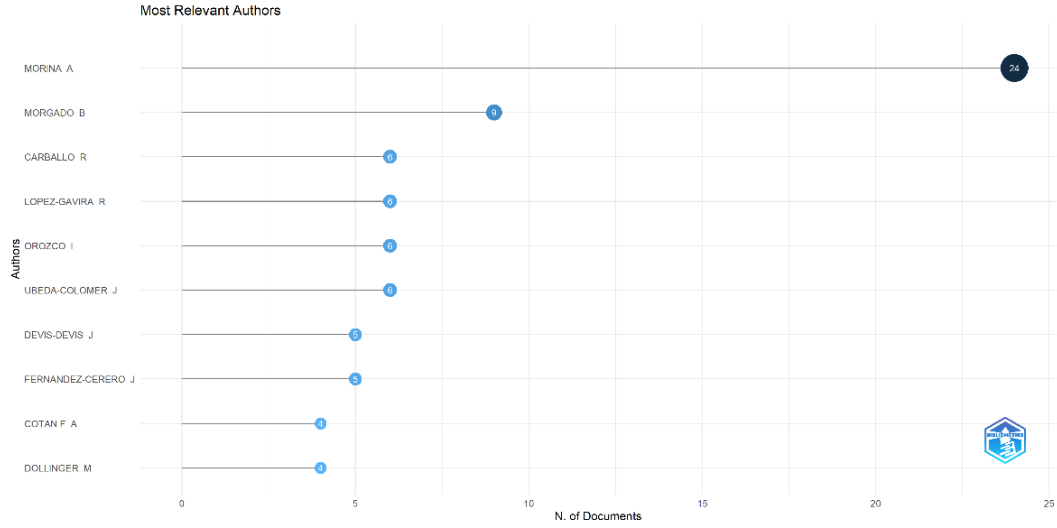

Figure 3: Most Relevant Authors

Source: Extracted from Bibliometrix

Most Prominent Sources

The top 10 journals, as detailed in Figure 4, contribute a significant portion of the total publications related to academic dropout. Among the leading journals are Desabilty & Society (20), African Journal of Desability (18) and Educational Sciences (15). It is also followed by Frontiers in Psychology (12) and Sustainability with 11. Meanwhile, Revista Complutense de Educación, Revista Española de Discapacidad-Redis, Frontiers in Education, International Journal of Inclusive Education and Healthcare, are the ones that publish the fewest articles.

This information highlights the most influential publication channels in the field of study, being useful to understand the structure and dynamics of production, as well as to access the most relevant literature on the subject, in addition, it can be valuable for researchers, professionals in the field of higher education to make interested decisions in the area of disability and related issues.

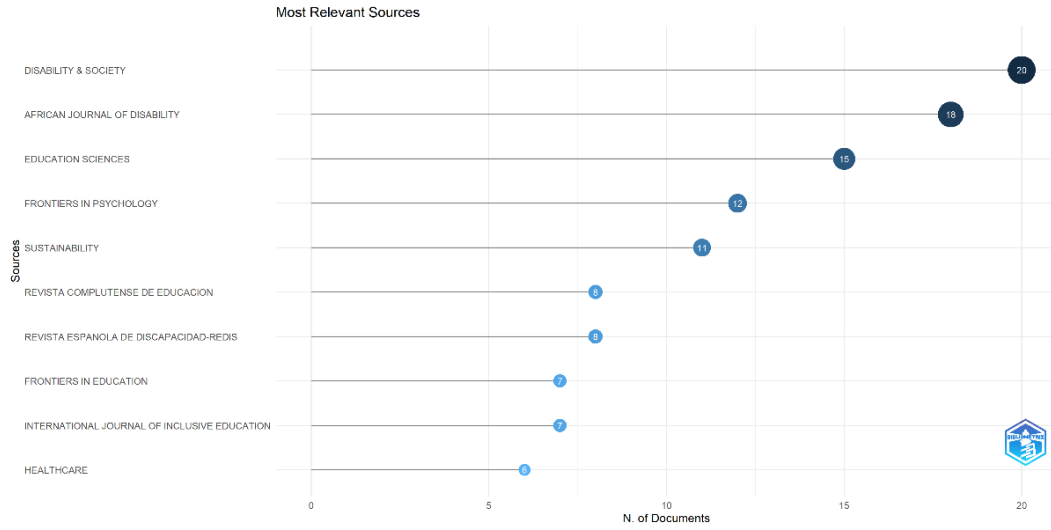

Figure 4: Most Relevant Sources

Source: Extracted from Bibliometrix

Top Affiliations

In Figure 5, among the 10 most prominent affiliations, the University of Seville leads with a significant difference in production with 65 publications. Followed by State University System Of Florida (21), Universitat D'alacant (19), Open University – Uk (17), Vanderbilt University (14), Stellenbosch University (13), Taipei Medical University (13), Trinity College Dublin (13), Florida International University (12) y Universidad De Cadiz (12).

This finding details the institutions with the highest productivity in terms of publications in the field of dropout in students with disabilities, which is important for the identification of leading research centers and experts in the field with the purpose of facilitating collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the advancement of research on related topics.

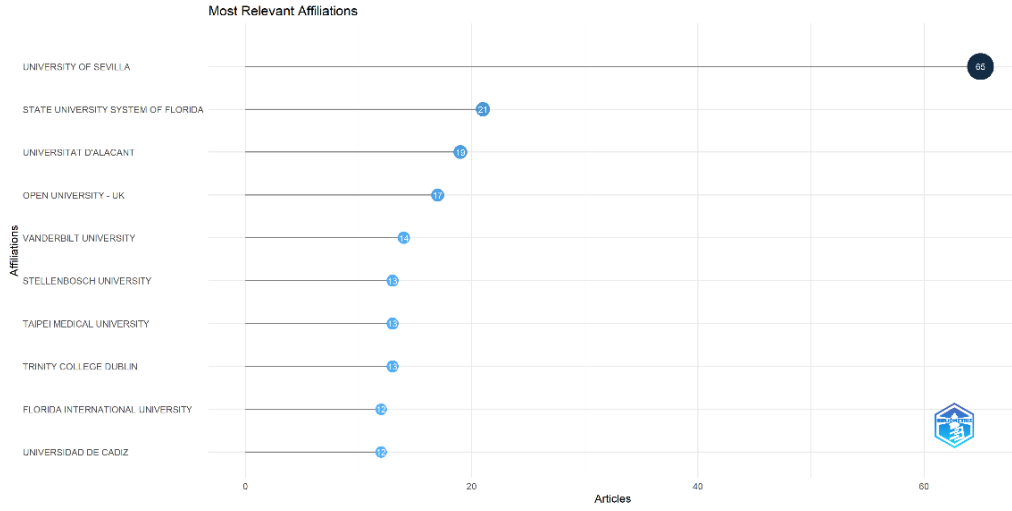

Figure 5: Most Relevant Affiliations

Source: Extracted from Bibliometrix

Most Prominent Countries Worldwide

Figure 6 shows the geographical distribution of scientific production worldwide where the intensity of the shading indicates the volume of publications in each country, the darker the color means that there is a greater contribution. In the first instance, blue countries such as Spain (289), the USA (167) and the United Kingdom (83), prove to be among those with the highest frequency of article publication. Meanwhile, light blue wines such as South Africa (53), Australia (44), Canada (42), Saudi Arabia (38), Italy (30), Ireland (28), China (27) show moderate production. On the contrary, the nations marked in gray are registered with less activity in production.

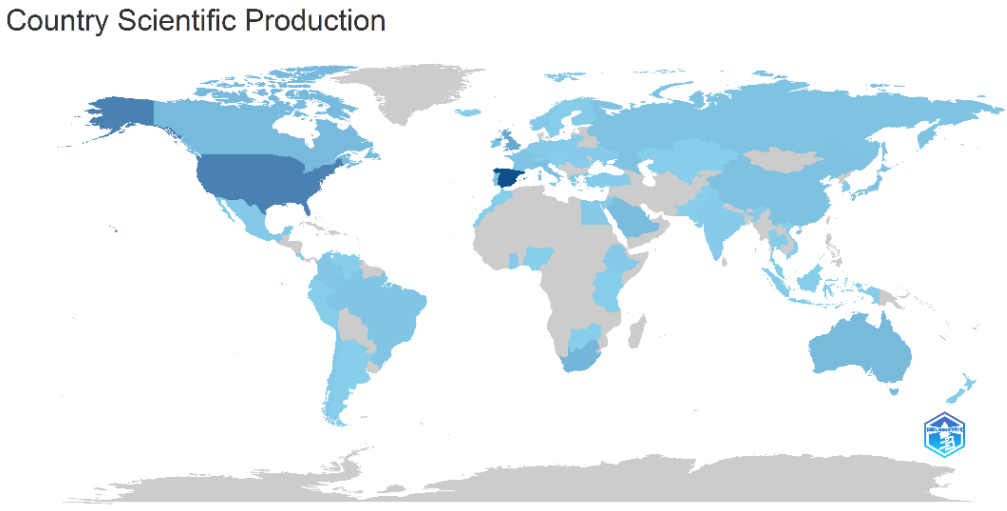

Figure 6: Scientific Production By Country

Source: Extracted from Bibliometrix

Contribution Relationships

The relationships on contribution through the technique of co-occurrence and co-authorship are detailed below:

Keyword co-occurrence analysis technique

For the generation of Figure 7, in Vosviewer "co-occurrence" was selected as the type of analysis and as the unit "Keywords", therefore, the minimum threshold of occurrence was established at 5, which resulted that of the 1705 words identified only 138 met the threshold and in this way 5 groups of nodes (cluster) were formed.

The terms planetary, clusters or clusters were as follows: "Higher Education" (green), "Dropout" (purple), "College-students" (red), "Disability" (blue) and "University" (yellow). These terms coexisted with the satellite terms that are identified with the same colors and established a relationship that is represented by clusters of co-occurrence.

In the first grouping of green it is associated with the terms "higher education students", "pedagogy", "instruction", "design", "experience" and "politics". This connection reflects key

elements that make up the ecosystem at this level and how they are interrelated. Meanwhile, the second blue group focuses on disability with elements such as "assistive technology", "teachers" and "teaching", these being the main supports needed in the context of students with disabilities.

In the third red grouping, it is directly associated with populations such as adolescents and adults and includes aspects such as mental health, prevalence of problems, anxiety, depression and social support. Therefore, this highlights the relevance of comprehensive care, beyond academic aspects and their disability. In the fourth purple grouping, demographic elements, risks, identity, gender and skills are highlighted, which includes the diversity and specific needs of the population. In relation to the yellow group, it refers to terms such as access and quality of life.

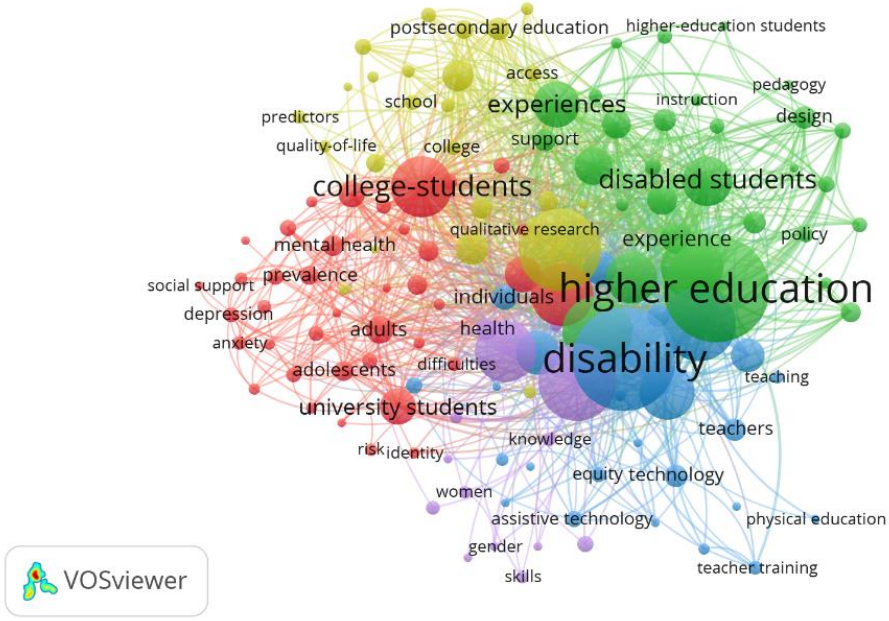

Figure 7: Keyword Co-Occurrence Network

Source: Extracted from VOSviewer.

Note. The words "Dropout" and "University" are not evidenced in the bibliometric network, however, in the program they were identified before downloading as the main words in the clusters.

Author co-authorship analysis technique

Figure 8 shows the analysis-type network of "Co-authorship" and "Authors" as a unit. The total number of authors was 1672, and only 74 were connected through collaborative studies with a minimum of five citations. Through this type of analysis, the graph identified four different groups of authors, with Morina Anabel being the most influential, since she has expanded her collaboration in all the members of the groups.

On the one hand, the red cluster highlights authors such as Cotan, Melero and López; in the blue cluster are Perera, Spinola, Cotan and Carballo; while, in the green are Domenech, Orozco, Aguirre and López; and in the yellow it is pointed out Morgado who has collaborated only with Morina and López.

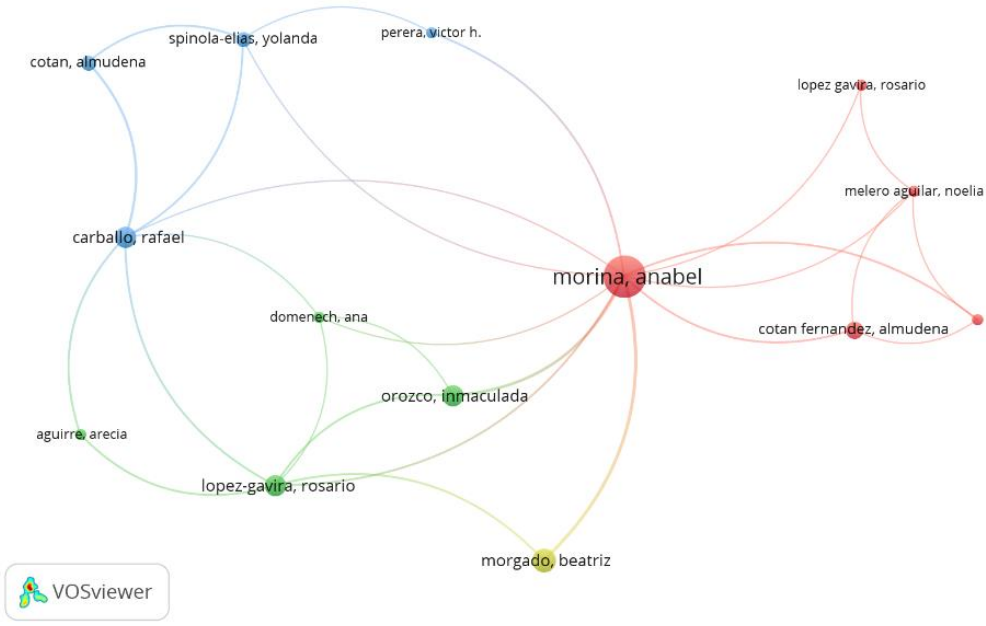

Figure 8: Author Co-Authorship Network

Source: Extracted from VOSviewer.

Discussion

The results have shown a growing trend with an annual rate of 14.5% in scientific production on academic dropout in students with disabilities from higher education from 2005 to 2025. This annual product is positive and emphasizes that researchers have directed their interest in the subject to the academic community. In relation to the leading authors, journals and affiliations, it has allowed us to understand the structure and dynamics of research in this field. On the one hand, the recognition of experts projects collaboration, exchange of knowledge and progress in the production of research. Meanwhile, the most influential journals make it possible to publish these articles and the institutions allocate the budget for their development.

In the geographical distribution of production, countries such as Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom are labeled as leaders in production. This emphasizes that they are nations with a solid infrastructure, financing and policies that support and benefit the study of academic dropout in students with disabilities. However, despite this, the moderate and non-existent contribution of other countries emphasizes the need to promote greater global participation for a more equitable distribution and greater generation of scientific knowledge.

Regarding the analysis of co-occurrence and co-authorship, the maps have provided outstanding information on the relationships and dynamics of collaboration of the researchers who developed the studies. In the first instance, the clusters reflected the main themes and also research approaches, as well as the collaboration networks between these experts. From this perspective, the results are useful for identifying potential opportunities for collaboration, emerging areas and research gaps. In reference to the latter, knowledge gaps are identified, such as the approach to the different types of disability that exist, which, due to their different characteristics and

manifestations, may be associated with dropout rates in higher education students.

Likewise, from the bibliometric analysis, certain limitations have also been presented. For example, data collection was limited only to the Scopus and Web of Science databases which, although very important, it is possible that by not considering other databases, relevant and open access publications are being omitted. On the other hand, considering the production of scientific articles without considering books, book chapters, conference proceedings, among others, can also restrict an understanding that effectively addresses the general panorama of research on school dropout in students with disabilities.

Under these premises, future research should prioritize the inclusiveness of the types of disability in the academic dropout of students in order to promote the equitable growth of scientific production in the field and avoid the generalization of results based on the net concept of disability.

Conclusions

The study used bibliometric analysis to track the production of research on school dropout in students with disabilities over the last 20 years, indexed in the Scopus and WoS database. From the findings, it is concluded that:

In scientific performance there is a gradual growth that is on the rise with a rate of 14.5% between 2005-2025; the most outstanding author is Morina A; while the journals with the greatest production influence are Desabilty & Society, African Journal of Desability and Educational Sciences; the affiliations with the highest publication are the University of Seville; and there is a significant geographical distribution in Spain, the USA and the United Kingdom.

In the relations on the contribution, it is concluded that the analysis of co-occurrence and co-authorship identified the main themes and approaches through 1705 identified words where only 138 met the threshold and in this way 5 groups of nodes (cluster) were formed, as well as the collaboration networks between the researchers, reaffirming that Morina A is one of the authors who has stood out the most for her participation in the 4 identified groups.

Some limitations are recognized, such as the possible bias in the databases used and the lack of incorporation of other types of documents such as books, book chapters, conference proceedings. Therefore, in future bibliometric studies it is expected that these limitations will be addressed to strengthen the selection, validity and usefulness of the findings.

Finally, it is suggested that, in future research, the inclusion of the different types of disability should also be prioritized to avoid the generalization of results based on the generic concept of disability, from this, a broader and more specific knowledge will be generated, adjusted to the particularities of this group of students in the academic dropout of Higher Education.

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