

QUALITY OF LIFE AND EDUCATION: PATTERNS, RESEARCH TRENDS, AND OVERLAPS

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Abstract

The link between quality of life and education has attracted increasing interest from the scientific community, but the intersection between the two fields remains underexplored. The aim of this study is to map the intersection of research in this field through a bibliometric analysis, aiming to identify the most influential publications, dominant keywords, research trends, the most prolific journals and their characteristics, as well as the geographical and institutional distribution of studies. The Web of Science database was queried with a broad intersection of keywords, and the data were analyzed using the Bibliometrix package in R version 4.5.1 (RStudio IDE). The dataset includes 4,883 documents published between 1984 and September 2025, contributed by 17,492 authors, with an average annual growth rate of 16.71% and an average of 13.27 citations per article. The results highlight a growing interest in converging themes such as higher education, well-being, and mental health. The purpose of the study is to provide a comprehensive and structured overview of this emerging research area, supporting future theoretical development and evidence-based policy and educational strategies. The study provides an integrated picture of how education and quality of life intersect, contributing to strengthening interdisciplinary dialogue and opening new directions for future research.

Keywords: Quality of life, Education, Trends, Patterns, Bibliometric analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Quality of life is addressed worldwide by numerous researchers, but what does quality of life really mean? It is perceived and understood differently by each of us, thus becoming a living organism (Ignat et al., 2022) in continuous modification and development due to the subjective perception of individuals.

Over time, measuring quality of life has been of interest to various institutions, and the calculation methodology has varied depending on the aspects desired to be captured in various forms, thus encompassing several dimensions. Table 1 presents five composite indicators that aim to quantify quality of life, having different names, but which try to capture quality of life in several areas.

TABLE 1. QUALITY OF LIFE INDICES HIGHLIGHTING EDUCATION AS A KEY DIMENSION

Index	Source	Main domains	Education-related note
Quality of Life Index	Numbeo (2025)	Purchasing power, safety, health, cost of living, pollution, traffic, climate	Includes education indirectly
Better Life Index	OECD (2024)	11 domains: health, education, income, work, environment, etc.	Education is explicitly included as a distinct domain
Territorial Quality of Life Index	ESPON (2020)	Life Flourishing, Life Maintenance, Good Life Enablers	Education is included in sub-dimensions related to personal and social well-being
Human Development Index	UNDP (2024)	Health, education, standard of living	Education is one of the 3 key dimensions
Quality of Life Framework	Eurostat (2024)	8+1 dimensions: health, education, activities, environment, safety, etc.	Education is explicitly included as a dimension

Source: Created by the authors based on the calculation methodologies of the five indicators

According to Fahley et al. (2003) the dimensions captured by the quality of life are: economy, education, health, social assistance, food and environment, and the five indicators presented in Table 1 capture, through various indicators, these areas.

Thus, it can be observed that the quality of life is an amalgam of indicators and dimensions, one of which is education itself. Three of the five composite indicators analyzed in Table 1 explicitly target the education dimension as a sub-indicator in the indicator calculation methodology.

Therefore, it can be observed that the level of education influences the quality of life of both the individual and a country.

According to the World Bank (2024) higher education contributes to stimulating economic growth, reducing poverty and, ultimately, increasing shared prosperity. Moreover, Pedro et al. (2021) argue that effective HSEs have an impact on the quality of life within a region at any level, whether we are talking about health, safety, environment, economy, education or leisure.

Diener (2000) in his work proposes the creation of a National Well-being Account that complements the economic and social indicators representative of the quality of life with a subjective perspective of the

population's perception. Moreover, beyond the economic perspective that public policies related to the quality of life aim to, this mechanism supports decision-makers in developing public policies that address the aspects of the quality of life that matter to them: social support, freedom, health, equity, clean environment. In 2015, over 40 nations had adopted National Well-being Accounts in one way or another (Diener et al., 2015).

An example of an alternative approach to the National Well-being Account proposed by Diener (2000) is the Gross National Happiness Index of Bhutan, which complements traditional economic indicators (e.g. GDP) by measuring happiness and well-being through dimensions such as health, education, time use, cultural resilience, diversity, ecological resilience, standard of living and governance (OECD, 2024). These initiatives illustrate that education is considered a central factor in assessing overall well-being.

Research on the intersection between quality of life and education is limited. This may be due to the fact that, as already presented in Table 1, education, in its various forms, is one of the dimensions of quality of life. However, this study aims to specifically analyze trends, patterns and epistemic overlaps for quality of life and higher education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between quality of life and education is addressed in the literature from various perspectives, namely:

1. education as a factor influencing quality of life (Buon and Compton, 1990; Ross and Van Willigen, 1997; Skevington, 2010; Pedro et al., 2021; Zhan et al., 2022; Gaia et al., 2024).
2. quality of life as a factor influencing education (Pichler, 2006; Henning et al., 2011; Gil-Lacruz et al., 2020).

Ross and Van Willigen (1997) examine the relationship between education and several subjective indicators of quality of life, such as anxiety, depression, anxiety, pain, aches, dissatisfaction and general well-being for two samples from 1990 and 1995. The results of this comparative study between the two samples show that respondents with a higher level of education register a lower level of physical and emotional suffering.

Pedro et al. (2021) evaluate the effectiveness of public universities in Portugal through a pro-sustainability approach and analyze its impact on regional quality of life, highlighting the particular role of social, cultural and environmental factors.

Gaia et al. (2024) analyze the relationship of quality of life with higher education among older adults. The results show that higher education for older adults contributes to their quality of life by improving mental health and cognitive function, thus encouraging active aging.

Zhan et al. (2022) analyze the relationship between education and quality of life in China (1991-2020), and the results proved that the level of education plays a significant role in promoting the quality of life in the short and long term.

Skevington (2010) analyzes the relationship between quality of life from the perspective of health, education and culture. The main results show that tertiary/higher education brings better mental health, reducing stress levels, less dependence on treatments, thus perceiving better physical condition. Last but not least, tertiary education strengthens social networks and the perception of social support.

Another aspect highlighted in the specialized literature regarding the intersection between education and quality of life is given by formal education that is completed by obtaining certificates or diplomas that are absolutely necessary for employment in the labor market in better-paid positions or jobs, thus ensuring a better quality of life in terms of the working environment, but also of the salary obtained (Buon and Compton, 1990).

At the same time, and vice versa, quality of life influences education. According to Henning et al. (2011) and Pichler (2006) the living conditions and health status of young people, defining dimensions for quality of life, influence their educational opportunities. Thus, targeted educational public policies can contribute to a better quality of life (Gil-Lacruz et al., 2020).

Another study (Gil-Lacruz et al., 2020) that analyzes the relationship between the quality of education from a health perspective and education, at the level of young people, proposes a set of recommendations in the development of social policies, namely: increasing equal opportunities for students from unfavorable socioeconomic backgrounds; promoting informal education; targeting the young population and targeting education and health.

Therefore, although the specialized literature is limited, it highlights a direct, bidirectional and significant influence relationship between quality of life and education, which supports the analysis in this article of future research directions.

3. METHODOLOGY

Bibliometric analysis performed with the help of VOSviewer or RStudio software programs offers the possibility of analyzing a large number of publications from a specific database. This is also one of the limitations of these programs, the fact that you cannot integrate publications from multiple databases, but they can be analyzed individually.

In order to identify patterns, research trends, epistemic overlaps and future research directions, a bibliometric analysis of publications in the field was performed in the Web of Science database, a database recognized for the quality of publications. Data include all publications indexed in the database up to 12 September 2025.

To capture the specificities of tertiary education and different forms of quality of life, we queried the Web of Science database using the broad intersection of keywords ("higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "university education") AND ("quality of life" OR wellbeing OR "life satisfaction" OR "happiness" OR "human development"). We analyzed the resulting 4883 records in R version 4.5.1 (RStudio) and documented screening and eligibility in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1).

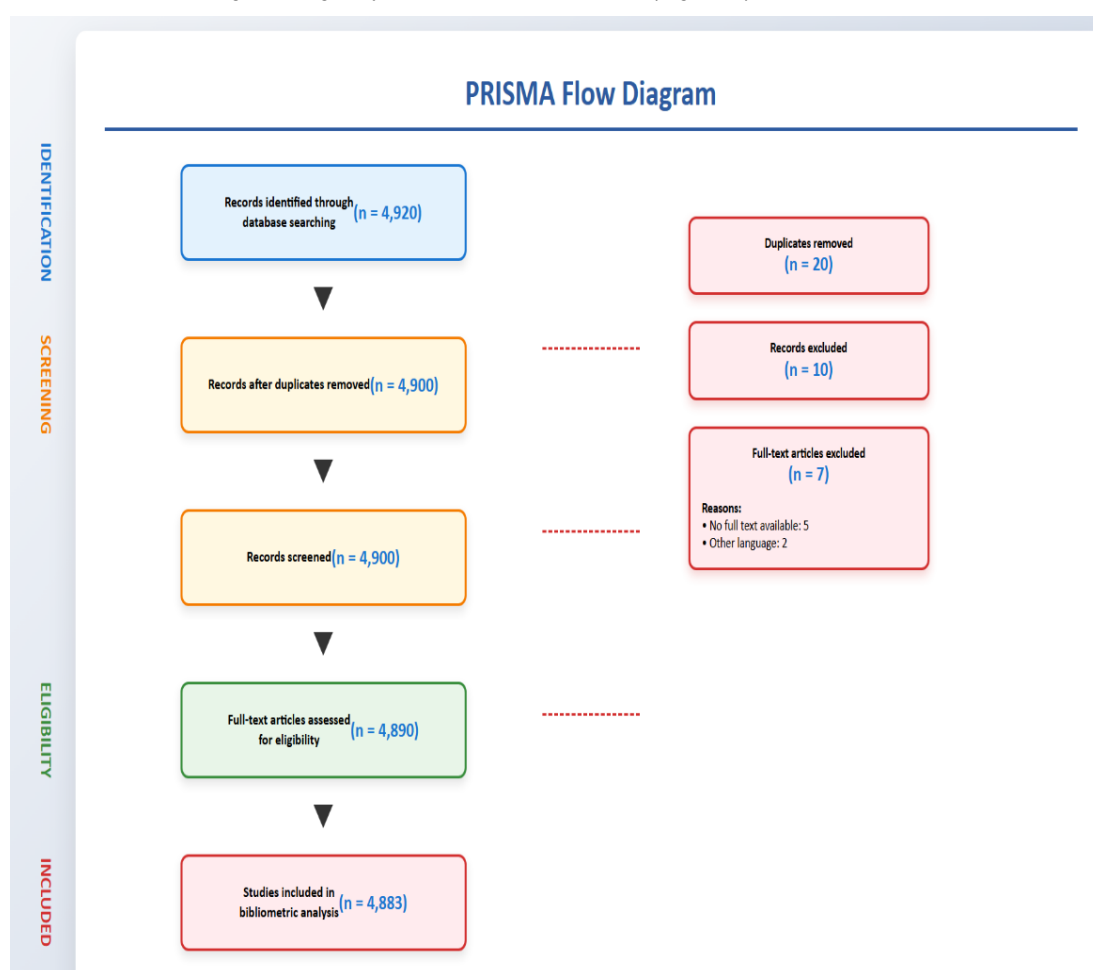


FIGURE 1. PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM

Source: Adapted from PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for bibliometric studies

Thus, Figure 2 presents the main information about the data. The long period of 41 years and 17492 authors offers a longitudinal view of the field's evolution. 4883 documents published in the Web of Science database and 2399 of sources indicates a low ratio of documents to sources (approximately 2:1), which can be explained by: a broad coverage that includes publications from various journals and sources; the

research is spread across a diverse set of publications, which could indicate a lack of central "core" journals; database bias. The high annual growth rate of publications, of 16.71%, shows a growing interest of researchers in this topic, which may be due to either the increasing funding for this topic or the emergence of emerging subfields in this area. The considerable number of 186792 references shows a solid documentation of the works based on multiple previous research and studies.

The average citations per doc is over 13, and international co-authorship is 21.33%. Also, over 4 Co-Authors per Document indicates a high collaboration between researchers, which ensures a higher visibility and impact for the publications.



FIGURE 2. MAIN INFORMATION ABOUT DATA

Source: Author's own conceptualization

Moreover, missing data were analyzed, revealing a high proportion of missing values for keywords plus (22.28%) and completely missing data for science categories (100%). Accordingly, keywords plus and science categories were not included in any further analysis.

In this sense, analyzing main information about data, the following research questions will guide further analysis:

RQ1 What are the most highly cited papers in this collection?

RQ2 What are the dominant keywords?

RQ3 Which journals are the most prolific and influential in this field, and what are the key characteristics of these journals (e.g., impact factor, subject area)?

RQ4 Where is the research being conducted, and are there any dominant geographic regions or institutions?

RQ5 How have research topics changed over time, and what are the emerging trends in this field?

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first publication in the Web of Science database on the subject of quality of life at the intersection of education level appeared in 1984 (Figure 3). Until 2012, the number of annual publications, although increasing, did not exceed 100 published documents. Starting with 2012, interest in this topic has grown steadily, with 2024 recording the highest number of publications in the analyzed period, 612 documents. However, 2025 is still in full swing, and the number of publications up to the analyzed date is very close to the value of 2024. This aspect shows an increasingly high interest of researchers in the connection between quality of life and education.

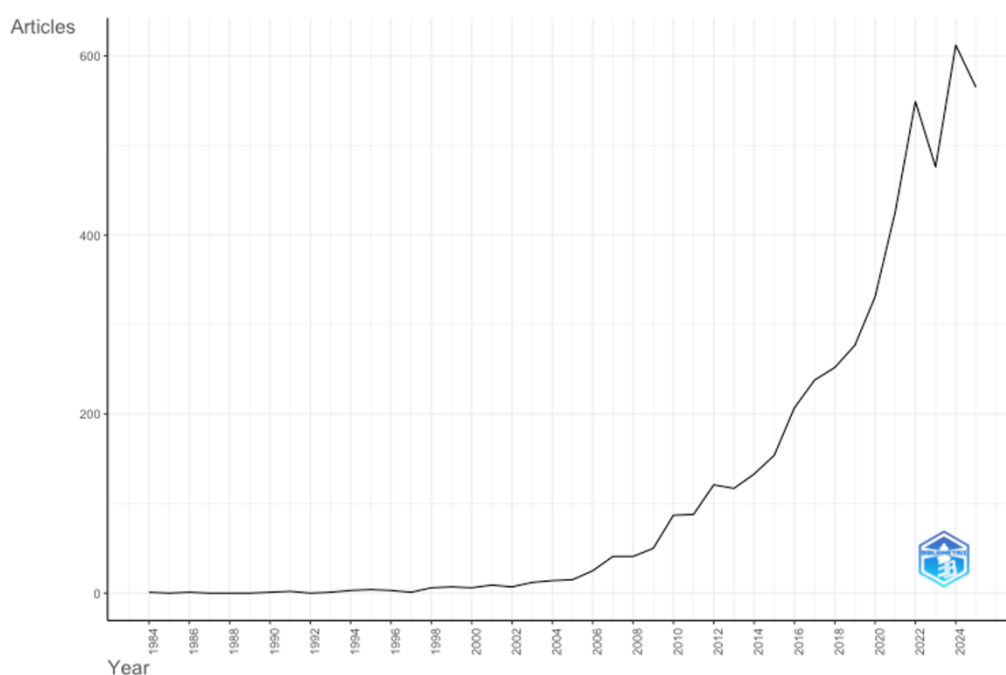


FIGURE 3. ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION
Source: Author's own conceptualization

In order to dive into the subject a Three-Field Plot (Figure 4) was generated regarding Author's Country of Affiliation (AU_CO), Author (AU), and Merged Keywords (KW_Merged). Thus, Figure 4 reveals the relationships between these. Results indicate that a significant portion of the publications in this dataset are from authors affiliated with institutions in China. Other countries with a high impact in this area of research are the USA, Norway, Spain and the UK.

Several authors, notably "Li Y", "Wang X", "Liu X", "Wang Y", "Zhang L", "Chen Y", "Xu Y", and "Zhang Y", have strong connections to keywords in the dataset. These authors seem to be prominent contributors to the research areas represented by the keywords.

Analyzing the keywords, one can notice the focus for the two topics, namely:

1. Quality of life given by keywords such as: quality-of-life, depression, happiness, anxiety, mental-health, stress, life satisfaction.
2. Education given by keywords such as: higher education, students, education, university.

The presence of "COVID-19" suggests that a portion of the data likely includes research related to the pandemic's impact or maybe some research was conducted during the pandemic period.

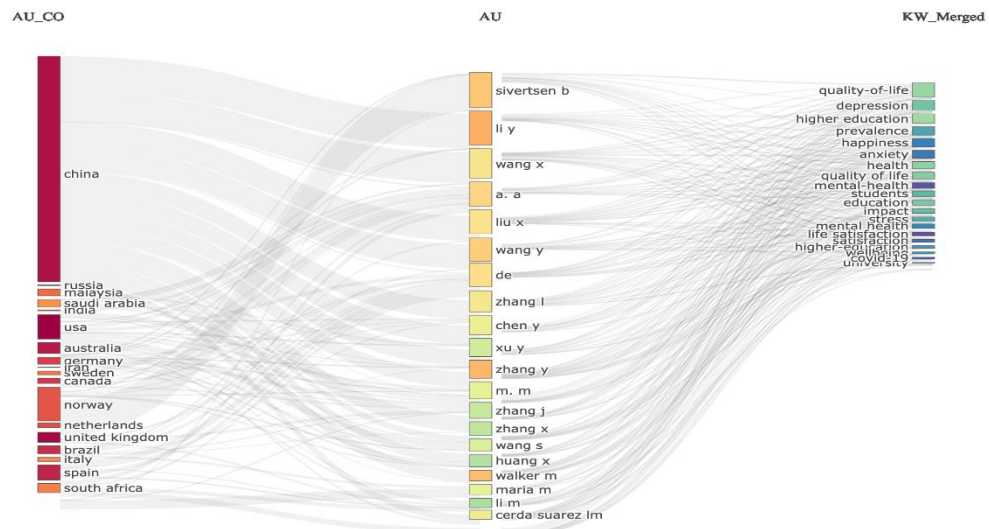


FIGURE 4. THREE-FIELD PLOT
Source: Author's own conceptualization

Moving forward, we analysed the most globally cited documents from our database. Thus, Figure 5 shows first 10 most cited documents and number of citations for each of them.

First and foremost is a relatively recent study by Klein et al. (2016) entitled The German version of the Perceived Stress Scale – psychometric characteristics in a representative German community sample. One of the results of this study shows that higher levels of education, especially tertiary education, are associated with lower perceived stress, which contributes to a better quality of life. At the same time, the study by Bewick et al. (2010), which analyses the psychological well-being of students at a UK university during their student years, shows that their well-being is subject to greater pressures compared to previous educational levels.

Another study in this top, (Tan et al., 2020), analyzes the links between subjective well-being and socioeconomic status, one of the indicators included in the analysis being educational attainment, for 2,352,095 participants in 357 studies. Thus, the results show that the level of well-being of respondents is positively associated with their subjective well-being, although the impact is considerably lower than that given by the level of income. At the same time, the level of income increases with the level of education.

According to OECD (2024), obtaining a tertiary education level brings an average salary advantage of approximately 56% compared to people with an upper secondary education level. This aspect supports the fact that higher education contributes both directly and indirectly, through average income, to the well-being of the individual, and ultimately to the quality of life. Other topics addressed by the most cited studies include: the impact of education and income on health (Sullivan et al., 2005); the relationship between well-being and social inclusion (Correa Velez et al., 2010); the influence of education, income and health on the perception of aging and subjective well-being (Steverink et al., 2001); and the role of continuing education in maintaining quality of life in the elderly (Arai et al., 2015).

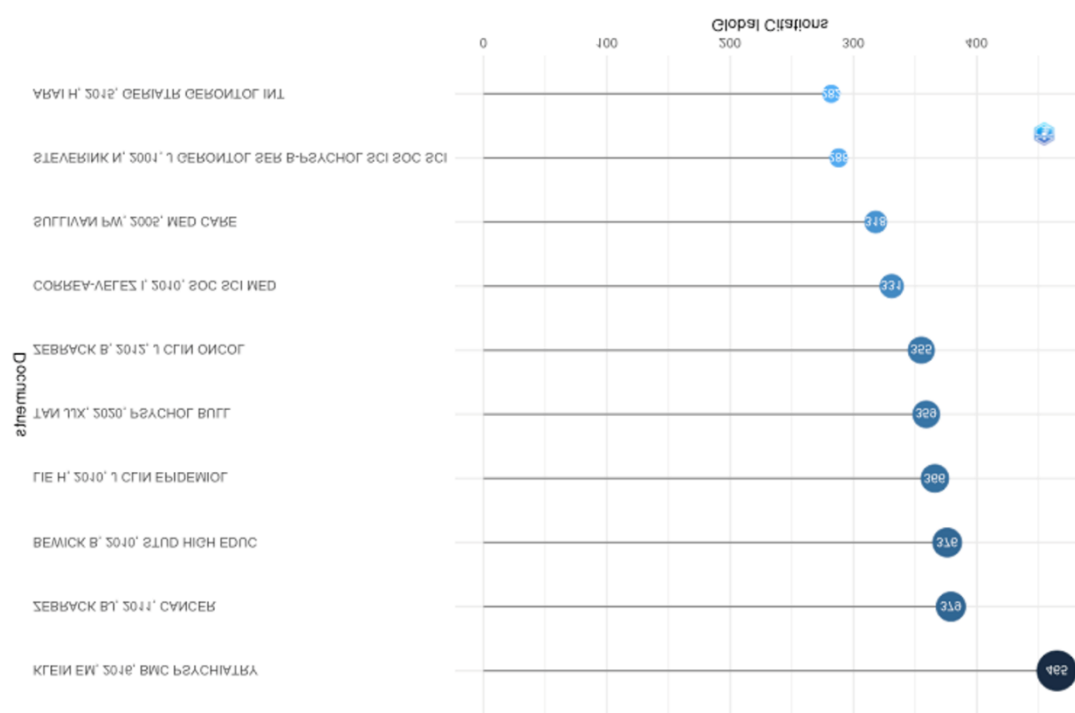


FIGURE 5. MOST GLOBAL CITED DOCUMENTS
 Source: Author's own conceptualization

Regarding the ranking of authors by the number of articles published in this field over time (Figure 6), it can be noted that once they approached this topic, they remained interested in it for a long period of time. It can also be noted that some authors are also found in Three-Field Plot, namely Li Y, Sivertsen B, Wang X, Zhang Y, Zhang L.

The author with the highest number of published articles is Li Y. During the period 2013-2025, he published 16 articles, obtaining a total number of citations of 216. The second author with a significant number of publications in the field (15 articles), Zhang Y, debuted with his first work in 2016, and by the time of data collection, the total number of citations for articles in the field was 118.

Authors Sivertsen B and Wang X have shown interest in research in this field since 2017 and 2014, respectively, and the 13 and 11 documents published in the Web Of Science database have collected a significant number of 351 and 307 citations, respectively.

The youngest author in this ranking by the year of the first publication (2018) is Liu X. However, the number of citations (183) and the number of published articles (11) is significant. The same author also holds the most cited work in this ranking, published in 2019, with a total number of citations of 133 and an annual citation rate of 19. At the opposite end, the longest-lived author in this ranking is A A, with the first work published in 2007.

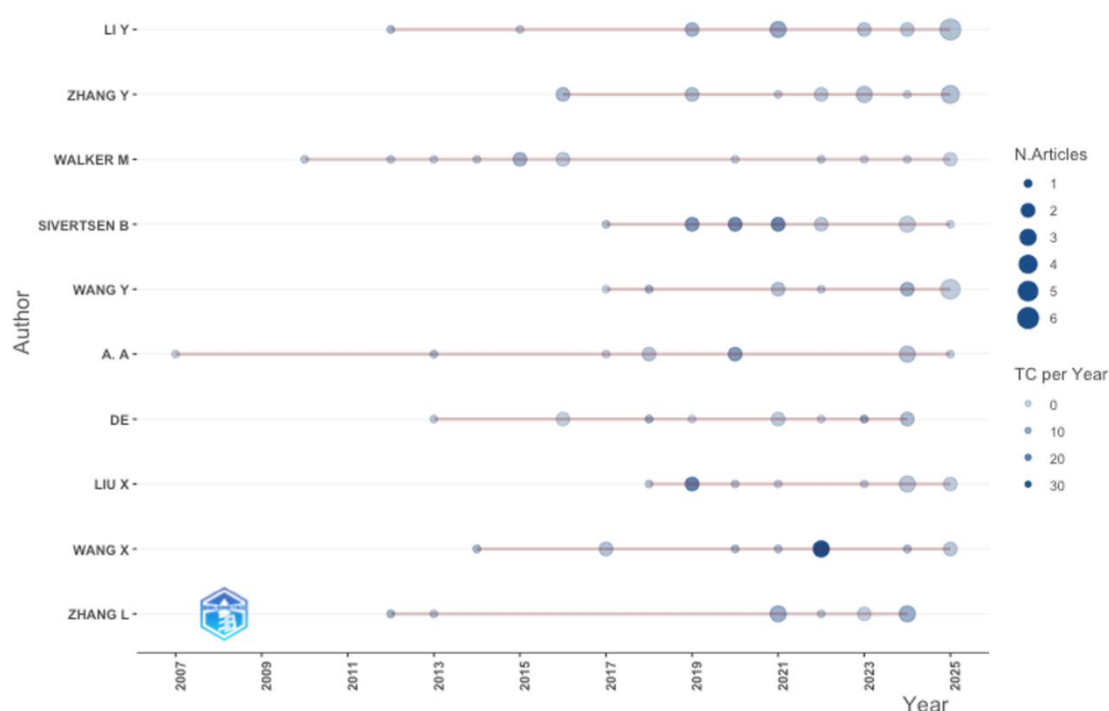


FIGURE 6. AUTHOR'S PRODUCTION OVER TIME
Source: Author's own conceptualization

Starting from the most cited works and the authors' production over time, the institutional affiliation of the authors was analyzed (Figure 7) as well as the collaboration in the elaboration of the publications (Figure 8).

Thus, Figure 7 reveals that the ranking of the most relevant affiliations belongs to higher education institutions, an aspect that supports the importance and relevance of this study.

This ranking reveals that five of the ten affiliations are universities from Australia, these totaling 393 articles published, thus representing just over 50% of the total number of articles published by the 10 affiliations in the ranking. Thus, we can argue that the Australian HEIs pay increased attention to this field through various methods: either they allocate considerable financial resources in this field of research, or they are

supported in order to approach and research this topic for other reasons. Other relevant affiliations can be found in Indonesia, the UK, Canada and Portugal.

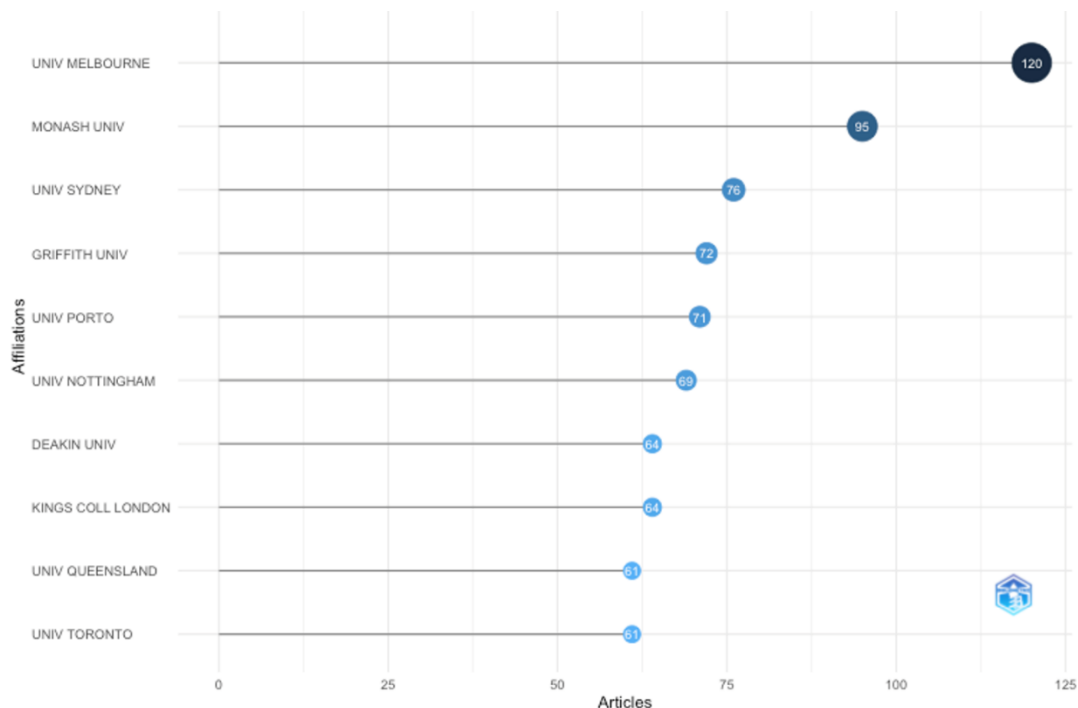


FIGURE 7. MOST RELEVANT AFFILIATIONS

Source: Author's own conceptualization

Regarding collaboration between different countries, the collaboration world map (Figure 8) shows an intense connection between countries on all six continents. Countries such as Australia, USA, Canada, China, UK, Spain record the most collaborations on the world map, these being important research centers that have both resources and extensive experience. Collaboration between researchers from different countries contributes significantly to the exchange of experience and the development of research adapted to the differences between regions and cultures, influenced by the traditions and values of the respective nations.

At the same time, beyond the collaborations between important research centers in developed countries, there is also a collaboration with research centers and developing countries. Countries in South America such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina collaborate mainly with the USA, Canada and European countries. Also, South Africa collaborates especially with European countries, as well as the USA and Australia.

However, the rate of documents published by multiple countries is considerably lower than single country publications. Just over 20% of the articles published in the analyzed field in the Web of Science database are multiple country publications.



FIGURE 8. COLLABORATION WORLD MAP
Source: Author's own conceptualization

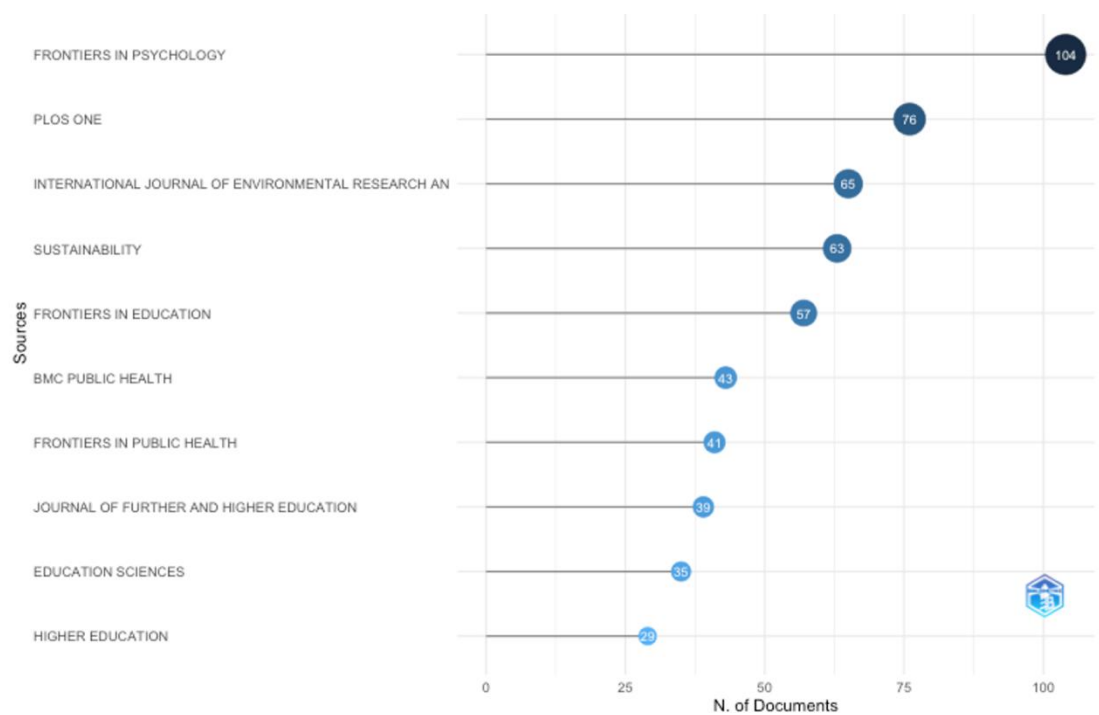


FIGURE 9. MOST RELEVANT SOURCES
Source: Author's own conceptualization

Next, from the 2399 sources in which documents indexed in the Web of Science database on the field analyzed in this study were published, the first top 10 sources (Figure 9) were extracted and analyzed by the number of published articles. Thus, the ten journals cover just over 10% of the total number of published documents. Frontiers in Psychology is the only journal in which over 100 articles were published in our extracted database.

Considering the most relevant sources, an analysis of their main characteristics was carried out, such as impact factor, research field, quartile, database where the works are indexed, h-index, SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), and access type.

TABLE 2. ANALYSIS OF JOURNALS ACCORDING TO MAIN EDITORIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Journal	Impact Factor (2024)	Subject Area	Quartile	Indexing	Country	h-index	SJR	Access Type
Frontiers in Psychology	3.27	Psychology (General & Applied)	Q2	Scopus, Web of Science	Switzerland	161	1.02	Open Access
PLOS ONE	2.82	Multidisciplinary Science	Q1	Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science	USA	467	1.07	Open Access
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	3.74	Public Health, Environmental Science	Q2	Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science	Switzerland	130	0.89	Open Access
Sustainability	4.32	Environmental Studies, Energy, Management	Q1/Q2	Scopus, Web of Science	Switzerland	120	0.85	Open Access
Frontiers in Education	2.44	Education (Theory & Practice)	Q2	Scopus, Web of Science	Switzerland	34	0.71	Open Access
BMC Public Health	3.83	Public Health, Epidemiology	Q1	Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science	UK	142	1.12	Open Access
Frontiers in Public Health	3.46	Public Health, Health Policy	Q1	Scopus, Web of Science	Switzerland	78	0.98	Open Access
Journal of Further and Higher Education	3.97	Higher Education, Policy	Q1	Scopus, Web of Science	UK	47	1.15	Subscription
Education Sciences	3.74	Education, Psychology, Public Admin.	Q1/Q2	Scopus, Web of Science	Switzerland	41	0.82	Open Access
Higher Education	8.06	Higher Education, Law, Sociology	Q1	Scopus, Web of Science	Netherlands	123	2.15	Subscription

Source: Author's own conceptualization

Thus, it can be noted that most journals are open access, with the exception of Journal of Further and Higher Education and Higher Education, thus favoring visibility and citations for published documents, but

also availability for readers. Also, most journals are in Q1 or Q2, which indicates international visibility, academic prestige and rigor in terms of methodology. Moreover, most journals are indexed in Web of Science and Scopus, and those targeting the medical field have the opportunity to be indexed in PubMed. Last but not least, it can be noted that the ten journals analyzed cover, for the most part, the two dimensions: quality of life through its psychological and health particularities (Frontiers in Psychology, BMC Public Health, Frontiers in Public Health, IJERPH), and education (Higher Education, Journal of Further and Higher Education, Frontiers in Education, Education Sciences). At the same time, the journals PLOS ONE and Sustainability are distinguished by their multidisciplinary approach and orientation towards environmental issues.

However, the journal Higher Education stands out by far as having the highest impact factor (8.06), but also the highest SJR (2.15), which indicates that it is a selective journal, with prestige and influence, frequently cited among researchers. However, only 29 articles on the analyzed subject were published in this journal.

The last part of the study analyzes trend topics over the over 40 years of publication (Figure 10), the clustering of documents by keywords from a semantic point of view (Figure 11) and a statistical clustering of influential scientific documents (Figure 12).

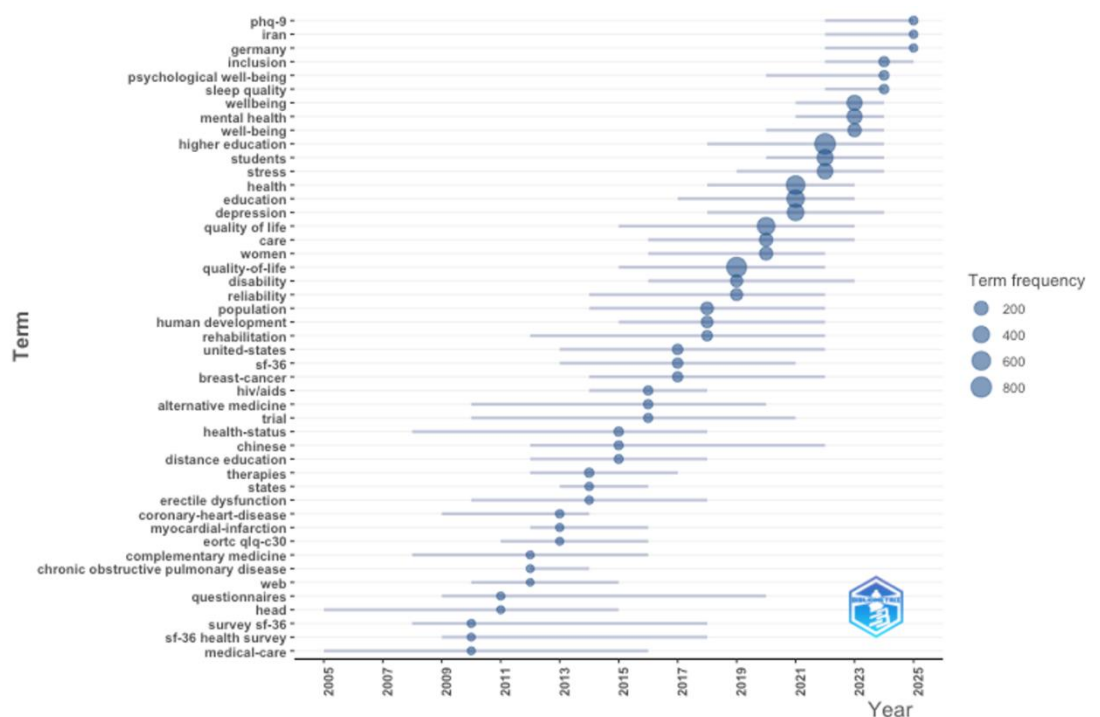


FIGURE 10. TREND TOPICS
Source: Author's own conceptualization

The evolution of relevant terms considered during the research supports the understanding of the dynamics of researchers' interest in certain periods of time, also influenced by contextual factors such as the COVID 19 pandemic.

It can be seen that researchers' interest in the topic of quality of life begins to take shape only around 2015. Subsequently, research from the period 2015–2021 focused specifically on quality of life from a psychosocial perspective, targeting aspects such as well-being, mental health, stress and inclusion.

Regarding the field of education, it becomes visible in the specialized literature approximately two years later, followed by an explicit approach to topics related to higher education and students.

The term mental health recorded a significant increase in 2021, approximately one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be explained by the effects of social isolation and the transition to online education, generating increased concern for mental health among the academic population.

Based on the centrality indicators from the semantic network analysis, a network graph was created (Figure 11). Thus, the most frequent and important terms are: higher education, quality of life, health, education, students. We also distinguish two major thematic clusters: one centered on higher education (students, higher education, academic performance, stress) and another centered on quality of life and health (depression, anxiety, quality of life).

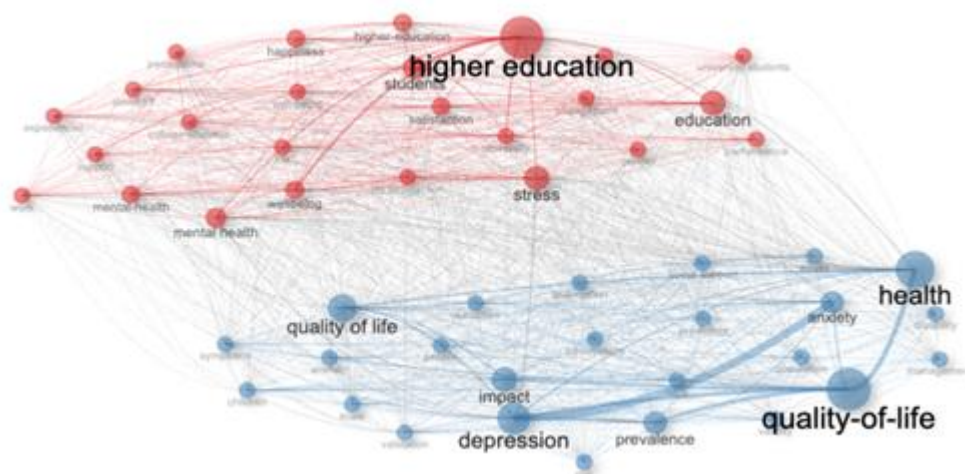


FIGURE 11. CONCEPTUAL NETWORK GENERATED BASED ON CENTRALITY ANALYSIS OF TERMS FROM SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE

Source: Author's own conceptualization

Regarding the links between the two clusters, these are essential to understand the intersection between the two domains. Thus, terms such as stress, mental health, happiness or inclusion represent points of convergence between the two domains. Moreover, the linking terms indicate an interdisciplinarity of the two domains and their approach together to obtain an integrative perspective.

Last Figure (12) highlights three distinct bibliographic clusters. The red cluster brings together works focused on topics specific to higher education, mental health and well-being. The green cluster integrates works on topics such as well-being, higher education and happiness, and the blue cluster integrates life satisfaction, higher education and subjective well-being.

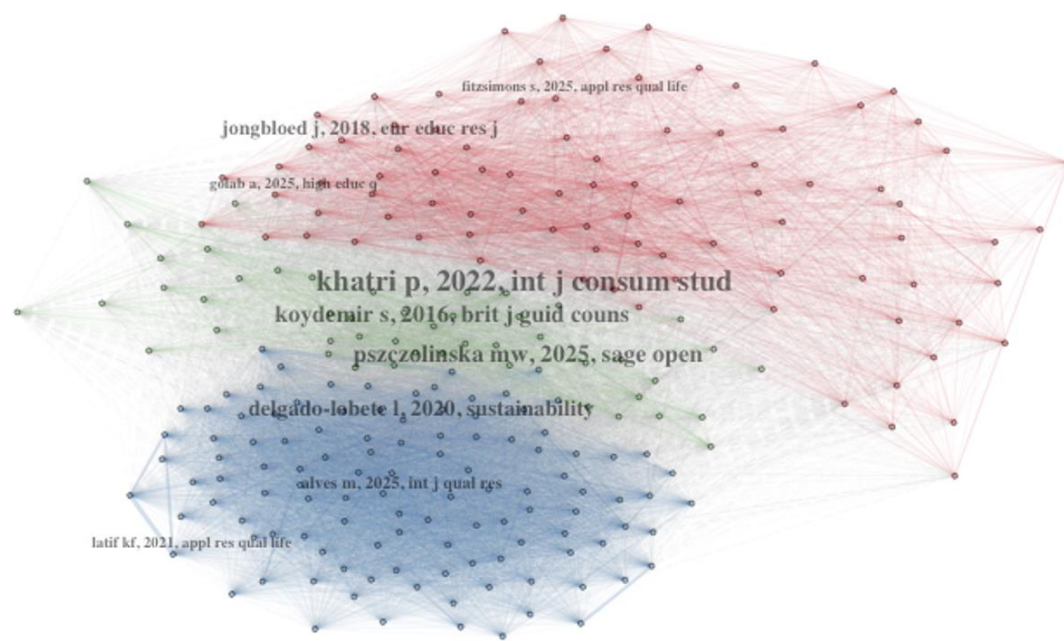


FIGURE 12. NETWORK OF DOCUMENTS LINKED BY COMMON REFERENCES (CITATION COUPLING)
Source: Author's own conceptualization

Thus, it can be noted that, while higher education is a common term for all works in the three clusters, quality of life is a very broad term captured in the works under various dimensions such as happiness, well-being, life satisfaction. This structure suggests a thematic diversity and an interconnection between apparently distinct domains, but relevant for the analysis of quality of life in an educational context.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Quality of life integrates more dimensions than it seems at first glance, and education is a field that influences both directly and indirectly, both at the individual and societal level.

Since the specialized literature has a gap in terms of studies that target the intersection between the two interconnected fields from a bibliometric perspective, this study captured this aspect, thus identifying new research opportunities.

Although the first study was published before the 1990s, researchers only showed a high interest in this field of research 20 years later, after 2010. In the 41 years since the first publication, trend topics have

evolved significantly, and terms such as quality of life, higher education, well-being, students have only appeared since 2015.

The three-field plot reveals a research landscape where authors affiliated with institutions in China are particularly active in publishing on topics related to well-being, mental health, education, and potentially COVID-19. The network also highlights prominent authors and their specific keyword associations.

The most prolific journal in publishing articles in the field, having published over 100 articles, is *Frontiers in Psychology*, an open-access journal, available to readers worldwide.

Important research centers whose employees have addressed this topic are Australia, the USA, Canada, the UK, Spain, and global collaboration is present on all six continents, regardless of the level of development of the partners.

Although network graphs clearly present the connection between the two fields more from a psychological or health perspective, the two fields can be explored from multiple perspectives, such as environmental, economic or social for a better exploitation of what the two fields can offer together.

The research limitations of this study may be caused by the database used for data collection, namely Web of Science. Also, the bibliometric analysis does not reflect the quality of the content of the articles, but only the frequency and relationships between terms.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors declare that they have not used any Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies during the preparation of this work.

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