



Equity Sensitivity as a Moderator of Job Demands and Job Resources on Work Engagement: Insights from an Empirical Study of Student Affairs Educators in Chinese Universities

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Received 08/02/2025

Revised 27/02/2025

Accepted 27/03/2025

Abstract

Background and Aim: Within the context of Chinese universities, Student Affairs Educators (SAEs) play a pivotal role in student affairs. However, research on their work engagement remains limited. This study aims to investigate the impacts of job demands, job resources, and equity sensitivity on SAEs' work engagement, drawing insights from the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model.

Materials and Methods: A quantitative research approach was adopted, involving a survey of 906 SAEs from various universities in Guangdong Province, China. The study employed validated scales to measure job demands, job resources, equity sensitivity, and work engagement. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted, which was instrumental in revealing the complex interplay and underlying mechanisms affecting job-related outcomes.

Results: This study finds that (1) Job demands have a positive effect on SAEs' work engagement, (2) Job resources enhance engagement, and (3) Equity sensitivity exacerbates the negative impact of job demands and weakens the positive influence of job resources.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the importance of a supportive work environment in enhancing SAEs' work engagement. University administrators should consider strategies to balance job demands and enhance job resources. Additionally, SAEs themselves should proactively utilize available job resources and manage their workloads effectively to boost work engagement and job satisfaction. The study contributes to the understanding of SAEs' work outcomes and well-being, providing practical recommendations for enhancing their work engagement.

Keywords: JD-R Model; Equity Sensitivity; Student Affairs Educators in Chinese Universities; Work Engagement

Introduction

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model is a highly integrated theoretical model that can be applied to studying the relationship between job demand, job resources, and work engagement (Bakker et al., 2023). According to this model, job demands and job resources constitute value-based job characteristics (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013). Specifically, job demands refer to the physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that are negatively valued and require sustained physical or psychological effort. (Bakker et al., 2003). In contrast, job resources are positively valued physical, social, or organizational aspects that facilitate achieving work goals and stimulate personal growth and development through motivational processes (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli & Taris, 2013).

Considering the differences in working characteristics and working methods between SAE groups and general enterprise employees, the job demand and job resource incentive design for the SAE group should also be very different from that of the general enterprise employees. It is reasonable to explore the interactive influence of job resources and job demand on SAE work engagement in universities based on the JD-R model.

Second, although the JD-R model identifies the job characteristics that lead to engagement, it does not focus on the unfairness at work. Perceived inequity can alter the effects of job demands and job resources, leading to lower engagement and work dissatisfaction. Especially in collectivist cultures such as China, where harmony, solidarity, and cohesion are favorably valued, and equity is a sensitive issue (Leung & Bond, 1984). Equity sensitivity, as a personal trait, describes the degree to which an individual perceives



fairness in inputs and returns, and it may moderate the relationship between job demands and job resources on work outcomes. This paper argues that equity-sensitive SAEs are more likely to experience lower work engagement when facing high job demands. Additionally, they may respond negatively to job resources if they perceive unfair treatment in resource allocation.

In doing so, this study contributes significantly to the field in two key ways: First, by designing and validating the scales to assess the job demands and resources specific to SAEs, this study captures the details of how to improve SAEs' engagement in the workplace, providing more targeted guidance for practices. Second, this study takes into full consideration the moderating role of equity sensitivity in the JD-R model, equity sensitivity functions as a moderator in both the impact of job demands on work engagement and the impact of job resources on work engagement.

Objectives

1. To investigate the current situation of SAE work engagement in public universities.
2. To study the causal relationships between job demand, job resources, equity sensitivity, and work engagement among SAE in public universities.
3. To analyze and check the consistency of causal relationships between job demand, job resource, equity sensitivity, and work engagement among SAE in public universities with the empirical data.

Literature Review

Student affairs originated from student work practices in United States universities, and specialized working models are currently being formed. In Chinese universities, teachers engaged in student affairs work have a particular title - Student Affairs Educator. They are managed by the university's student affairs department and are responsible for student guidance and extracurricular affairs in various colleges and departments. In scholarly research, student affairs professionals are educators, and student affairs programs and services must be designed and managed with specific student learning and personal development outcomes in mind (Bloland, 1996). In Chinese colleges and universities, SAEs undertake a multifaceted role encapsulating nine critical responsibilities: ideological and theoretical education and value guidance, party and youth league and class construction, academic atmosphere construction, daily affairs management for students, psychological health education and counseling work, online ideological and political education, campus crisis response, career planning and employment guidance, theoretical and practical research. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017)

Work engagement reflects a positive work attitude and behavior, characterized by relatively stable psychological and behavioral traits. Next, Work engagement is a multi-dimensional concept covering cognition, emotion, and behavior; it is the individual's multi-dimensional and comprehensive experience of the work (González-Romá, 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Tummers et al., 2018). SAEs' work differs from general transactional labor; it is not directly related to labor products but rather to the social productivity of the most active individuals. As young students have active thoughts and strong independent consciousness, SAEs in universities must pay attention to the reality and needs of young students when working and timely grasp students' psychological and behavioral characteristics, which requires SAEs to keep abundant work time, energy, and emotion. This study believes that SAE work engagement in universities refers to the subjective feeling and experience of SAE in universities under multiple role tasks, which is manifested as a self-conscious, positive, and active input state, including multi-dimensional input experiences, such as spirit, consciousness, and specific behaviors.

Job demands are categorized into challenging and hindering types (Tims & Bakker, 2012). Challenging demands promote professional growth while hindering demands, including excessive workload and work-family conflicts, deplete energy and induce stress. This study focuses on hindering job demands as defined in the JD-R theory, characterizing them as negative influences that require significant physical and psychological effort, potentially leading to decreased work engagement (Bakker et al., 2023). Such demands often result in significant stress among employees, particularly for SAEs, who face unique



challenges due to the demanding nature of their roles in ideological and political education and management. Therefore, job demands can reduce work engagement among SAE employees.

Job resources refer to those aspects of the job that help individuals cope with job demands and stimulate personal growth, learning, and development. In this study, job resources include organizational resources (e.g., organizational justice), superior resources (e.g., support and guidance from supervisors), colleague resources (e.g., peer support and collaboration), student resources (e.g., student engagement and motivation), and family resources (e.g., family support and work-life balance). This study expects that these job resources will positively influence SAEs' work engagement. Christian et al. And Halbesleben identified important job resources, including autonomy, social support, feedback, and task significance, as predictors of engagement (Christian et al., 2011; Halbesleben, 2010).

Different occupations have different Job demands and Job resources. Job Demand and Job Resource are collectively known as Job Characteristics. These Job characteristics will affect the work engagement from different perspectives. From the perspective of the intrinsic Job characteristics of the work itself, it includes both the Job characteristics of enthusiasm and the Job characteristics of loss (Bakker et al., 2023).

Conceptual Framework

The research hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Job demand has a significant negative impact on SAE work engagement.

H2: Job resources have a significant positive impact on SAE work engagement.

H3: Equity sensitivity moderates the influence of job demand on work engagement.

H4: Equity sensitivity moderates the influence of job resources on work engagement.:

The theoretical model of influencing factors in SAEs is shown in Figure 1.

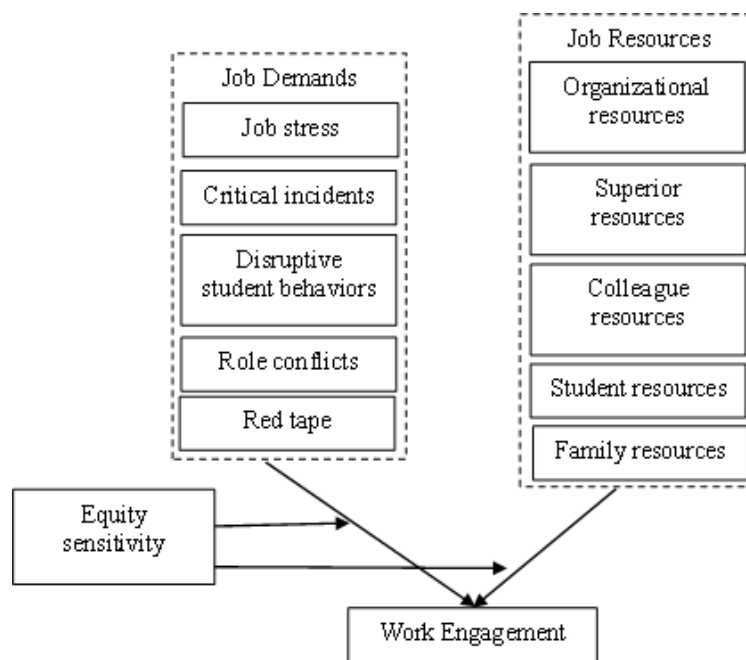


Figure 1 Theoretical model of influencing factors in SAEs

Note: Constructed by the researcher

Methodology

This study has developed two scales, including job demands and job resources, through a semi-structured interview with ten SAEs from public universities in Guangdong Province. This part of the



research utilized two-level coding in grounded theory to summarize and integrate data. Ultimately, combined with the interview results, the Job demands were initially identified as five dimensions: job stress, critical incident demands, disruptive student behavior, role conflict, and red tape. Similarly, the job resources were initially identified in five dimensions: organizational resource, superior resource, colleague resource, student resource, and family resource.

To improve the scientific reliability of the investigation, the pre-test selected in this institute is mainly used to test the scale and scale of the six scales, make the necessary revisions of the questionnaire according to the test results, and then develop the formal questionnaire. The preliminary survey covered four comprehensive universities, one finance and economics university, and one agricultural university. Questionnaires were distributed via a random online survey, with 147 responses collected (51.02% women, 55.78% holding a Master's degree, average age = 30.8).

All measures used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Work Engagement Scale used the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) with 9 items (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The scale included three dimensions: Vigor, dedication, and absorption. The Equity Sensitivity Scale used an Equity Preference Questionnaire (EPQ) with 10 items (Sauley, 2000). Two dimensions were included in this scale: Entitlement and benevolence. As mentioned above, the Job Demands Scale consists of 15 items with five dimensions, and the Job Resources Scale includes 16 items with five dimensions.

The reliability of the scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency, with SPSS 23.0 employed for the analysis. Subsequently, AMOS 24.0 was used to determine the suitability of the data for factor analysis, as indicated by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. In sum, all four measurement scales demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha > 0.8$), and the KMO measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity confirmed the appropriateness of factor analysis for each scale. After the small sample pretest, the formal questionnaire survey was conducted.

To test the hypotheses, the scale's reliability and validity, as well as the model fit, were rigorously evaluated. Second-Order Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS version 24.0, which was instrumental in revealing the complex interplay and underlying mechanisms affecting job-related outcomes. This analysis was crucial for exploring the impacts of job demands, job resources, equity sensitivity, and work engagement, facilitating a detailed examination of the causal relationships within the SAEs context (Qiu, 2013).

Results

1. Questionnaire reliability and validity analysis

During the formal assessment phase, the respective Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained for the Job Demand Subscale, Job Resources Subscale, Equity Sensitivity Subscale, and Work Engagement Subscale were 0.889, 0.904, 0.906, and 0.851, indicating robust internal consistency reliability for each subscale. We performed CFA to assess the construct validity of the four measurement models, which included job demands, job resources, equity sensitivity, and work engagement. The results are shown in Table 1, thus supporting their reliability and validity.

Table 1 Fits the index of the four Subscale factor structure model.

	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	CFI	NFI	IFI
Job Demand	1.472	0.023	0.982	0.973	0.993	0.980	0.993
Job Resource	1.879	0.031	0.974	0.962	0.988	0.974	0.988
Equity sensitivity	1.607	0.026	0.987	0.980	0.996	0.990	0.996
Work engagement	1.442	0.022	0.991	0.983	0.997	0.989	0.997

2. Characteristics of the Respondents

This study examines SAEs employed at public universities in Guangdong Province, recognizing their significant responsibilities—such as ideological and political duties—and the unique value they bring to

their organizations through their knowledge, thoughts, and experiences. Guangdong Province is home to 38 public universities with nearly 5,000 SAEs. To ensure that the final sample size would be sufficient, approximately 900 questionnaires were distributed, taking into account the possibility of low respondent cooperation (Yamane, 1967). The final survey included 17 undergraduate universities, selected to represent a diverse range of institutional types, with a balanced gender ratio to reflect the regional heterogeneity of Guangdong Province. The online questionnaire, distributed through university contacts, yielded 906 valid responses. All responses passed rigorous attention checks with an average completion time of 451 seconds, confirming participant engagement and data reliability. The specific sample size distribution is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Distribution of The Sample Size for The Formal Survey

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	445	49.12%
	Female	461	50.88%
Age	Age 25 and below	64	7.06%
	26-30 Years old	282	31.13%
	31-35 Years old	386	42.6%
	35-45 Years old	102	11.26%
	Over 45 years old	72	7.95%

3. Regarding the descriptive analysis of work engagement

This study uses the UWES scale for Work engagement analysis, which is well-understood in academic circles. According to the UWES scale, the main indicators of this dimension are as follows:

3.1 Vigor Dimension of Work Engagement: Although some SAEs (about 30%) feel a lack of energy or enthusiasm at work, the majority (about 47%-50%) report feeling energetic and vital while working and are eager to go to work in the morning. This indicates that most SAE maintain a high level of vigor and enthusiasm at work, but the issue of vigor and engagement deficiency in up to 30% of SAE needs further attention from the institution; the specific data are shown in Table 3.

Energy at Work: Refers to SAE feeling full of energy while working (UWES1-48). This indicator measures SAE's vitality and vigor levels, reflecting their enthusiasm and involvement.

Vitality at Work: Refers to SAE feeling energetic at work (UWES2-49). This indicator assesses SAE's work motivation and passion, manifested as their mental state and energy levels at work.

Desire to Work: Refers to SAE's eagerness to go to work in the morning (UWES3-50). This indicator measures SAE's expectations and desire for work, reflecting their interest and enthusiasm.

Table 3 The specific data about Work Engagement - Vigor Dimension

Topic\Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
UWES1-48	34(3.75%)	239(26.38%)	183(20.2%)	256(28.26%)	194(21.41%)
UWES2-49	39(4.3%)	225(24.83%)	201(22.19%)	264(29.14%)	177(19.54%)
UWES3-50	37(4.08%)	235(25.94%)	202(22.3%)	264(29.14%)	168(18.54%)

3.2 Dedication Dimension of Work Engagement: About 50% of SAEs feel passionate about their work, find it continuously motivating, and take pride in their achievements. However, around 27% of SAEs hold negative views on these aspects. Overall, the majority of SAEs demonstrate high levels of engagement and enthusiasm at work; the specific data are shown in Table 4.

Passion for Work: Refers to SAE feeling enthusiastic about their work (UWES4-51). This indicator assesses SAEs' enthusiasm and positive emotions towards their work, reflecting their strong sense of commitment to work tasks.

Work Motivation: Refers to whether the work consistently motivates SAE (UWES5-52). This indicator explores whether there are factors in the workplace that continually inspire and motivate SAE, reflecting the work's ability to stimulate SAE's positivity and drive.

Pride in Work: Refers to SAE feeling proud of the work they do (UWES6-53). This indicator measures SAE's sense of pride and recognition of their work, manifesting as a sense of value and accomplishment.

Table 4 The specific data about the Dedication dimension

Topic\Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
UWES4-51	27(2.98%)	232(25.61%)	198(21.85%)	263(29.03%)	186(20.53%)
UWES5-52	36(3.97%)	204(22.52%)	208(22.96%)	276(30.46%)	182(20.09%)
UWES6-53	25(2.76%)	224(24.72%)	203(22.41%)	263(29.03%)	191(21.08%)

3.3 Absorption dimension of Work Engagement: Most SAEs feel happy, immersed, and easily enter a state of flow while working. About 50% of SAEs report feeling joyful and absorbed in their work, and can achieve a state of flow. Despite the majority of SAEs showing high levels of engagement and immersion at work, around 28% of SAEs have a negative attitude towards these aspects; the specific data are shown in Table 5.

Happiness at Work (UWES7-54): Refers to SAEs feeling happy while working hard. This indicator assesses the pleasure and sense of achievement SAEs experience at work, reflecting their satisfaction and positive emotions.

Immersion (UWES8-55): Refers to SAEs being deeply immersed in their work. This indicator measures the degree of focus and complete involvement SAEs have in their tasks, showing their depth of engagement.

Flow State (UWES9-56): Refers to SAEs easily entering a state of flow while working. This indicator explores SAEs' immersion and high level of focus, reflecting the depth of their involvement and comprehensive participation in work tasks.

Table 5 The specific data about the Work Engagement - Absorption Dimension

Topic\Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
UWES7-54	42(4.64%)	227(25.06%)	197(21.74%)	258(28.48%)	182(20.09%)
UWES8-55	33(3.64%)	219(24.17%)	194(21.41%)	265(29.25%)	195(21.52%)
UWES9-56	43(4.75%)	209(23.07%)	205(22.63%)	273(30.13%)	176(19.43%)

4. The causal relationships between job demand, job resources, equity sensitivity, and work engagement

As Table 6 shows, using a second-order structural equation model to test the moderating effect of equity sensitivity, we first found that the model assessing the impact of job demands on work engagement, which is moderated by equity sensitivity, showed satisfactory fit as well ($\chi^2/df = 1.773$, RMSEA = 0.029, GFI = 0.946, AGFI = 0.938, CFI = 0.977, NFI = 0.950, IFI = 0.977). Job demand has a significant positive impact on SAE work engagement ($b=0.096$, $p=0.009$), thus rejecting hypotheses H1. The interaction between job demands and equity sensitivity significantly reduced work engagement ($b= -0.173$, $p < .001$), indicating the presence of a moderating effect, thus supporting hypotheses H3. Secondly, the model assessing the impact of job resources on work engagement, which was also moderated by equity sensitivity, displayed satisfactory fit as well ($\chi^2/df = 1.962$, RMSEA = 0.033, GFI = 0.938, AGFI = 0.929, CFI = 0.970, NFI = 0.941, IFI = 0.970). Job resources have a significant positive impact on SAE work engagement ($b=0.66$, $p < .001$), thus supporting hypothesis H4. The interaction between job resources and equity sensitivity significantly reduced work engagement ($b= -0.070$, $p < .001$), indicating the presence of a moderating effect, thus supporting hypothesis H4.



Table 6 Results of Second-Order Structural Equation

Path	Estimate	S.E.	CR	p	Conclusion
JD→WE	0.096**	0.037	0.261	0.009	Rejects H1
EPQ→WE	-0.048*	0.022	2.17	0.030	-
JD × EPQ→WE	-0.173***	0.012	-13.84	< .001	Supports H3
JR→WE	0.660***	0.056	11.799	< .001	Supports H2
EPQ→WE	-0.222***	0.024	-9.280	< .001	-
JR × EPQ→WE	-0.070***	0.008	-8.845	< .001	Supports H4

Notes: JD = Job Demands; JR = Job resource; WE = work engagement; EPQ equity sensitivity; S.E. = Standard Error.

*p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that (1) Job demands have a positive effect on SAEs' work engagement, (2) Job resources enhance engagement, and (3) Equity sensitivity exacerbates the negative impact of job demands and weakens the positive influence of job resources.

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the work engagement of Student Affairs Educators (SAEs) in Chinese universities. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, job demands were not found to have a significant negative impact on SAEs' work engagement. This is possible because of the unique job characteristics of SAEs, which play a crucial role in expanding the theoretical applications of the JD-R model. SAEs possess multiple identity attributes, including those of teachers, ideological instructors, administrators, psychological counselors, among others, and they are all members of the Communist Party of China. These individuals demonstrate a profound sense of responsibility, potentially having gradually adapted to the demands of their role over time. Additionally, it is plausible that some SAEs may respond by organizational values and expectations, indicating their adherence to and dedication to the ideological and operational framework of their institution. Consequently, they may perceive their job demands as less intense.

Instead, job resources have emerged as a significant positive predictor of work engagement, underscoring the crucial role of a supportive work environment in boosting employee engagement. This finding aligns with the JD-R model. To delve deeper into the specific work of SAEs and identify engagement solutions tailored to their occupational context, we utilize this model.

Furthermore, in response to the recent calls in the JD-R model research field (Bakker et al., 2023), we innovatively incorporate equity sensitivity as a moderator variable to explore the boundary conditions under which job demands and resources impact SAEs' work engagement. Equity sensitivity played a moderating role in both the relationships between job demands and work engagement and between job resources and work engagement. Specifically, SAEs who were more sensitive to perceived inequality were more likely to experience reduced work engagement when facing high job demands or when equity in job resource allocation was perceived to be unfair. This finding underscores the need for universities to address issues of fairness and equity in the workplace to maintain SAEs' well-being and engagement.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among job demands, job resources, equity sensitivity, and work engagement among 906 Student Affairs Educators (SAEs) in various universities in Guangdong Province, China. The findings indicated that job demands, contrary to the initial hypothesis, did not exert a notable negative influence on SAEs' work engagement. In addition, job resources emerged as a significant positive predictor of work engagement, highlighting the importance of a supportive work environment in boosting SAEs' engagement levels. Moreover, equity sensitivity was found to moderate the relationships between both job demands and job resources on work engagement. These findings contribute to the existing literature by filling a gap in research related to SAEs' work outcomes and enhancing the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theoretical framework.



Recommendation

1. Theoretical Recommendation

Based on the JD-R model, this study explores the dimensions that better fit SAEs' actual job demands and job resources and clarifies their impact on engagement. On the one hand, job demand, specifically job stress, critical incidents, disruptive student behaviors, role conflicts, and red tape, significantly contributed to SAEs' work engagement, which aligns with previous studies (Arik & Dunne, 2014). The significant positive relationship between job resources and work engagement underscores the importance of a supportive work environment. The negative correlation between job resources and work engagement further emphasizes the need for universities to allocate adequate resources and enhance communication to maintain SAEs' well-being. It has a positive impact on work engagement, further confirming the notion that a supportive work environment enhances employee engagement.

Second, in response to Bakker et al. (2023) call to consider the moderating factors of personal traits in future JD-R model research, this study combined SAEs' actual work situation and first added equity sensitivity as a moderating variable into the research model, attempting to answer the question of "How stable personality regulate job demands and resources on employees' work outcomes." It is found that, on the one hand, equity sensitivity positively regulates the relationship between job demand and job outcome. SAEs more sensitive to perceived inequality are more likely to reduce work involvement when facing high job demands.

2. Practical Recommendation

Based on the findings and discussions presented in this dissertation, several recommendations are proposed to enhance work engagement among SAEs. These recommendations are aimed at university administrators and SAEs themselves to foster a more productive and supportive work environment.

For school administrators, we offer three pieces of advice to follow. First, it is worth re-evaluating job demands. Since many SAEs experience job stress related to task quantity and reduced rest time, management should consider strategies to balance their Job Demands, which include prioritizing tasks, assigning additional staff where necessary, fostering a culture of flexibility and adaptability in the workplace, regular workload analyses, and adjusting job demands to ensure they are manageable and reasonable. Second, efforts should also be made to enhance job resources. Professional development opportunities, clear career advancement paths, and a supportive organizational culture can act as buffers against job demands and enhance work engagement. Given the importance of colleagues' resources, schools should foster a supportive and collaborative work environment, which includes organizing team-building activities, encouraging knowledge sharing, and promoting positive interpersonal relationships. Third, it is reasonable to promote equity and fairness. Given the significant role of equity sensitivity in the workplace, universities should ensure fair distribution of job demands and resources. Management should regularly review and optimize salary distribution and promotion systems to ensure equity and transparency. Recognizing and appreciating SAEs' contributions through awards, accolades, and opportunities for professional development can reinforce feelings of equity and belonging.

As for SAEs, in managing their workloads, SAEs are advised to prioritize tasks, delegate where possible, and maintain open communication with their superiors. Effective workload management not only enhances work engagement but also boosts job satisfaction. Additionally, SAEs should proactively utilize available job resources, drawing support from colleagues, superiors, and the organization to handle job demands more effectively. Moreover, developing emotional intelligence is crucial for SAEs as it enhances their ability to understand and manage emotions in high-stress scenarios. This skill fosters improved student and colleague relationships, creating a more supportive work environment. These strategies are essential for SAEs to thrive in their roles and contribute positively to their educational settings.



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