Organisational Learning as a Cornerstone of the Rule of Law in Public Administration Reforms: The Case of a Selected Slovenian Institution

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Abstract:

Public administration (PA) must respond to various environmental challenges, which are systematically addressed through administrative reforms. To adapt to the demands of stakeholders, public servants should constantly develop their competencies to achieve common goals in the implementation of law and foster systemic thinking within teams and mental models to implement the Rule of Law (RoL). The most significant reform of the PA in Slovenia in this respect entails the reorganisation of Social Work Centres (SWCs) in 2018. The reform saw the previously independent 62 public institutions being merged into 16, resulting in many new organisational structures and legal processes. Changes in the SWCs' operations are only possible following continuous organisational learning to ensure their legality, effectiveness and efficiency. Accordingly, the main goal of the presented study was to analyse the dimensions of the organisational learning of SWCs as part of adjusting to the various challenges of implementing RoL with a view to providing the grounds for an original contribution in the field of good public governance. A survey was conducted that included questions from the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire, which is a standardised measuring instrument of organisational learning on the individual, team and organisational levels. To apply the results of the quantitative phase to the context of the RoL, an in-depth semi-structured interview with a management representative was performed. The empirical results show that the specific dimensions of organisational learning at SWCs, as subjected to the Weberian model, have developed differently, especially those concerned with the interactions between officials, teamwork and communication, which affect change management and thereby the implementation of the RoL. This means that to develop organisational learning and thus assure successful implementation of public reforms in terms of RoL in social welfare it is crucial for public servants to primarily identify themselves with the PA institution in question, reflecting their attitude to the parties in administrative procedures.

Points for Practitioners:

The paper can be used by policymakers and practitioners in other countries to learn from experiences in Slovenian public administration regarding how to develop organisational learning to implement major PA reforms lawfully and effectively. Further, by describing facets of organisational learning in the exercise of public authority, the paper facilitates comprehension of the application of legal rules while considering balanced interests. This, in turn, fosters consistency in administrative actions among addressees and thus plays a key role in upholding the RoL.

Key words: organisational learning, rule of law, reform, social work centre, Slovenia

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1 Introduction

In times of uncertainty, as society experiences rapid changes in various aspects like demographics, the economy, technology, politics and so on, organisations need to stay agile and adapt to their environment. This is particularly important in public administration (PA) organisations, which must meet the demands of society while simultaneously upholding democratic principles. These organisations are generally characterised by a high degree of centralisation and externally imposed formalisation (Werkman, 2009). Different legal interests consequently come into play while designing and implementing effective public policies to assure democratic values and guarantees for the parties involved in administrative procedures (Galetta et al., 2015).

For PA to adapt and continuously adjust its organisational behaviour to the demands and expectations of citizens while also serving the public interest, it is vital that employees in these organisations understand the importance of the constitutional principle of the Rule of Law (RoL). In this regard, they must continually develop their abilities to achieve the desired results and cultivate open-minded thinking within the organisation, where collective learning is stressed, and employees learn how to learn together (Senge, 1994). Such an organisation is a learning organisation and represents a competitive advantage in a global environment of constant challenges (Weldy & Gillis, 2010). On the other hand, bureaucratic, hierarchical and rigid PA organisations that lack idea-sharing and the creation of a common culture have no future and are bound to fail in the long run.

The relationship between parties and authorities, whether on the EU, national or municipal levels, or bodies delegated by authorities, is regulated in the administrative procedure (Rose-Ackerman & Lindseth, 2010). This procedure serves as the fundamental framework for ensuring equity by reconciling the legitimate interests of specific legal traditions. To address conflicts arising between private and public interests and contribute to shaping new public policies within an institutional framework, managers of PA organisations must facilitate and encourage organisational learning, which refers to a continuous and cyclical process of creating new or transforming existing knowledge (Huysman, 2000). Organisational learning is crucial for PA as it operates in a constantly changing legal, political, economic and social environment (McNabb, 2006) and needs to develop innovative ways to develop new services that meet the expectations and needs of modern society.

PA in Slovenia is a comprehensive and complex system, including holders of public authorities delegated by the state to perform certain state tasks more efficiently and professionally. Among these are social work centres (SWCs) which, as public institutions, perform state authority tasks in the field of social welfare. Given that SWCs deal with sensitive life situations of individuals and families, often those who are materially or otherwise deprivileged, their ability to adapt to user needs and current social conditions while adhering to the principles of the RoL and the Welfare State is essential. Changes in SWCs' operations can therefore only occur through their continuous organisational learning, which is influenced by the user expectations, external stakeholders, political crises, budget constraints, and political frameworks that govern their operations (Rashman et al., 2009).

The fact that SWCs, as largely hierarchically organised entities of traditional Weberian administration, mostly carry out formally defined administrative procedures within the RoL framework while simultaneously having to constantly adapt to challenging environmental demands, means that their organisational learning is subjected to numerous peculiarities, even compared to this phenomenon in other PA organisations. While organisational

learning in the public sector and PA has been researched considerably less than in the private sector (Rashman et al., 2009), studies on organisational learning in social welfare are even harder to find (Gould, 2000). This article thus addresses the mentioned research gap through case study analysis of organisational learning in the social welfare organisation as a specific PA entity, along with its corresponding facets of organisational learning. For the analysis, the SWC Ljubljana was selected because it is the largest in Slovenia and hence the findings could be more easily generalised to other related public institutions in Slovenia and even broader within the European administrative space. Building on the outlined theoretical premises, two hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Specific dimensions of organisational learning in relation to the RoL have developed differently in the SWC Ljubljana.

H2: Employees with higher formal education allocate more time to work-related learning than those with formal education on lower levels.

Organisational learning encompasses more than just the sum of individual learning within an organisation. It also includes the acquisition of tacit or implicit knowledge, as reflected in the organisation's culture, collective consciousness, and an environment that encourages the sharing of ideas and knowledge transfer (Serrat, 2017). According to Gould (2000), organisational learning in social institutions occurs in various ways, both horizontally and vertically, on different levels. Consequently, this analysis focuses on the dimensions of organisational learning outlined by Marsick and Watkins (2003), which include individual, team and organisational levels of learning, each with specific dimensions (see Table 1). Organisational learning according to the authors' model contributes to continuous learning and the transformation of organisational behaviour, which encompasses both people and structure (Weldy & Gillis, 2010), making it particularly suitable for examining implementation of the RoL as a fundamental guideline in the exercise of public authority at SWCs, on the levels of both tailoring public policies and individual administrative procedures.

The goal of the presented study was to determine the extent to which organisational learning is present or developed in the SWC Ljubljana and its relationship with the RoL, identifying which dimensions have been developed and how learning influences changes in organisational behaviour in administrative processes, in line with the values and mission of social organisations and adherence to constitutional principles. The purpose of the study was to formulate recommendations for the development of social work centres as learning organisations as part of upholding the principles of legality, protecting the rights of parties, and safeguarding the public interest.

2   Theoretical background

Organisational learning enables organisations to address the complex needs and expectations of their users in today's world of constant social, economic and technological changes (Burnes et al., 2003). While this chiefly involves internal processes, PA organisations face numerous externally imposed changes following reforms affecting the institutional foundations of PA in specific jurisdictions. As highlighted by De Vries and Nemec (2013), these reforms aim to optimise the internal operations of government, to some extent stemming from the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm. Kovač and Bileišis (2017) suggest that these reforms must be addressed in an interdisciplinary way to successfully resolve cross-sectional and cross-border problems,

especially in the direction of the New/Good/Sound Public Governance (NPG) paradigm implemented with new modes of citizen engagement. However, traditional administrative systems in continental Europe, notably their public interest protection-oriented organisations, tend to lean towards "Neo" elements of the traditional Weberian model of administrative reforms. This entails a shift from an internal orientation towards bureaucratic rules to an external orientation towards meeting citizens' needs and wishes, consulting with and directly representing citizens' views, modernising relevant laws to encourage a stronger focus on achieving results rather than merely following procedures correctly, and professionalising the public service (De Vries & Nemec, 2013).

The RoL requires that all institutions performing public tasks on the national, supranational and local levels, regardless of their legal-organisational form, operate in line with legislation and apply the rules and procedures specified therein (Galetta et al., 2015). Accordingly, in this context Husa (2018, p. 131) interprets Bingham's procedural (thin) concept of the RoL as the consistent and stable enforcement of laws mutually accepted by all parties, ensuring protection against arbitrary decisions by authorities. On the other hand, the substantive (thick) concept has a wider scope, incorporating elements concerning economic and social structures, forms of governance, and interpretations of human rights. The thick concept hence intertwines political morality with the law, whereas the thin concept aims to maintain their separation, emphasising procedural elements and operating in a non-political manner. To achieve this at the level of specific organisations conducting administrative procedures, Garvin (1993, p. 78) highlights five activities that a PA organisation should focus on: (i) systematic problem-solving; (ii) experimenting with new approaches to work; (iii) learning from past experiences; (iv) learning from other organisations and stakeholders; and (v) continuous knowledge transfer within the organisation. In addition, organisations must have in place methods that enable individual and collective learning and an established system for motivating and rewarding employees.

PA organisations are social systems made up of civil servants employed by the organisation. The members of organisations are aware of their common identity and collectively question the nature of the organisations of which they form part, on both the level of the organisation and beyond, in terms of their integration into the administrative subsystem of a given society. This involves a shared understanding of the organisation's mission, vision and goals. It is about understanding the ideal future state that the organisation aspires to and, more importantly, the methods that it will use – possibly in collaboration with others – to realise this vision (Nonaka, 2008). All of this is possible only through organisational learning. If organisational learning places continuous and cyclical processes of acquiring new and transforming existing knowledge at the very centre of its operations, we can speak of a learning organisation. A learning organisation is based on processes that enable interaction and communication among employees regardless of the organisational structure and has a developed learning culture that encourages learning among all employees, information exchange, learning from mistakes, fostering creativity, and innovation. According to Marsick and Watkins (2003), such an organisation is made up of people who have internalised the ability to adapt and react to new learning methods in good time, while at the same time overcoming barriers to learning. Garvin (1993) highlighted that employees must, on one hand, have sufficient time to reflect on past actions, analyse and assess existing work methods, and contemplate the strategic development of the organisation. On the other hand, the organisation must encourage creativity and innovation, the exchange of ideas, and the breaking down of 'boundaries' within the organisation to permit the flow of ideas and information.

The essence of various organisational learning theories is encapsulated in the model of the seven dimensions of organisational learning developed by Marsick and Watkins (2003) and used to identify organisations successful at developing into learning organisations (Weldy & Gillis, 2010). Organisational learning occurs at different levels, including those of the individual, team and organisation (see Table 1). Only when activities on all three levels intertwine and all dimensions of learning are developed does it become an organisation where people continuously develop their abilities to achieve desired results, where new and open models of thinking develop, collective desires are free, and people continuously learn how to learn together (Senge, 1994).

Table 1: Model of seven dimensions of organisational learning

LEVEL	DIMENSION	DEFINITION
Individual	*Create continuous learning opportunities*	Learning is designed into work so that people can learn on the job; opportunities are provided for ongoing education and growth
	Promote inquiry and dialogue	People gain productive reasoning skills to express their views and the capacity to listen and inquire into the views of others; the culture is changed to support questioning, feedback, and experimentation
Team	*Encourage collaboration and team learning*	Work is designed to use groups to access different modes of thinking; groups are expected to learn together and work together; the organisational culture promotes and motivates cooperation between members of the organisation
Organisa-tional	*Create systems to capture and share learning*	Both high- and low-technology systems to share learning are created and integrated with work; access is provided; systems are maintained
	Empower people towards a collective vision	People are involved in setting, owning and implementing a joint vision; responsibility is distributed close to decision-making so that people are motivated to learn toward what they are held accountable to do
	Connect the organisation to its environment	People are helped to see the effect of their work on the entire organisation; people scan the environment and use information to adjust work practices; the organisation is linked to its communities
	Provide strategic leadership for learning	Leaders' model, champion, and support learning; leaders use learning strategically for business results

Source: Marsick & Watkins (2003, p. 139)

As Gould (2000) noted, a learning organisation is not an abstract mental construct but arises in the social relationships of the individuals within the organisation where, due to the integration of the needs of the organisation's users in the field of social welfare, learning must also occur from the bottom up, calling for a redefinition of the hierarchy of knowledge and decentralisation of power within the organisation. With this in mind, a reorganisation of Slovenian SWCs took place in 2018, including changes in their organisational structure. The previously autonomous 62 independent public welfare institutions were merged to form 16 new ones. This reorganisation also introduced the social activation of the long-term unemployed and an informative calculation of social rights into the Slovenian welfare system, along with other managerial and legal (procedural) changes. The objectives of this reform were to unify the SWCs' practices, reduce red tape, enhance

professional development, increase efficiency, and rationalise processes, all of which was intended to benefit the users of SWCs services by way of improved reachability and accessibility, individualisation, continuation, integrated and comprehensive services etc (Babšek, et al., 2020).

3   Methodology

Given the hypotheses outlined in the introduction and the focus of the research, a quantitative survey was chosen as the primary method for the study, supplemented by an in-depth semi-structured interview as a qualitative method. The rationale behind this approach was to utilise the interview method to elucidate any unexpected or unconventional survey findings, with the goal to provide for a more profound comprehension and exploration of the phenomenon. Further, it sought to triangulate the hypotheses through diverse research approaches to add to the validity of the study (Creswell & Plano, 2010).

For the analysis of the dimensions of organisational learning at the SWC Ljubljana, a survey was chosen as the primary research method in line with the hypotheses outlined. The data collection was carried out using the established Slovenian online survey tool, *1KA*. The survey comprised questions from the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ), which serves as a standardised measurement tool for evaluating the dimensions of organisational learning and assesses the following dimensions (Marsick & Watkins, 2003): individual level, team level and organisational level. The questions were adjusted according to the hypotheses and the research objective concerning adherence to the RoL principle in administrative decision-making and the institution's operations generally. Questions covered aspects of legality, legal certainty, and the protection of legitimate interests in the decision-making of civil servants as an outcome of implementing the RoL in administrative procedures.

The questionnaire forming part of the survey comprised 59 closed-ended questions, with 13 pertaining to the individual level of organisational learning, 6 to the team level, and 24 to the organisational level. Sections of questions concerning the measurement of organisational performance and demographic information were partly tailored to the organisation under examination, namely, the SWC Ljubljana, as the questions from the DLOQ questionnaire were unsuitable for analysis due to its unique characteristics as a public institution in the area of social welfare. The organisation's performance was addressed by 12 questions and 4 questions pertained to the demographic characteristics of the respondents within the organisation. The individual levels of organisational learning were further subdivided into dimensions, as shown in Table 1. The respondents had to indicate on a Likert scale from 1 to 6 the extent to which the behaviour described in the statement representing each characteristic of the selected dimension of organisational learning was observed at the SWC Ljubljana.

The questionnaire was administered to the entire workforce of the SWC Ljubljana. Out of 315 employees, 56 participated in the survey, representing 17.8 % of the total workforce. The largest segment in the sample comprised professional workers in social welfare, accounting for 82%. They were followed by administrative staff (10%) and middle management (8%). After the questionnaires were completed, the results of this phase were used to formulate questions for an in-depth semi-structured interview with the person responsible for organisational learning at the SWC Ljubljana. These questions were contextualised in terms of pursuing the RoL principle from the perspective of both public servants and the overall lawfulness of the institution's work.

4 Results

Among the variables related to dimensions of organisational learning in connection with RoL at the SWC Ljubljana, on a scale from 1 to 6 the highest value, as shown in Figure 1, was achieved by promoting inquiry and dialogue (3.9), followed by strategic leadership (3.7) and creating continuous learning opportunities (3.5).

Figure 1: Values of individual dimensions of organisational learning associated with the RoL
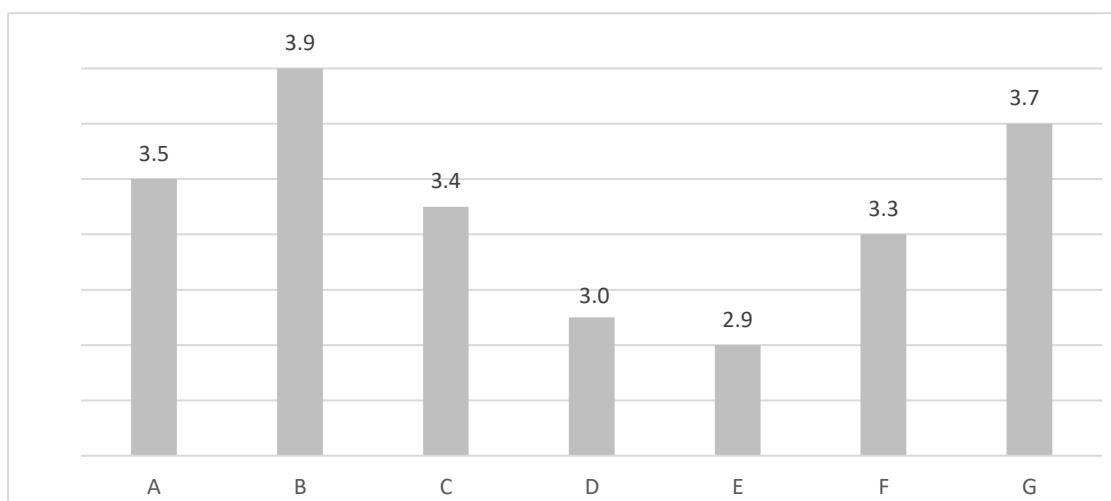
Legend: A – creating continuous learning opportunities, B – promoting inquiry and dialogue, C – encouraging collaboration and teamwork, D – establishing systems for knowledge capture and transfer, E – empowering employees towards a shared vision, F – connecting the organisation with its environment, G – strategic leadership related to organisational learning

Source: own analysis

The individual level of organisational learning in connection with the RoL is the most developed in the studied PA organisation, as evidenced by both the average value of the measured variables related to it (3.7), and the values of individual variables presented in Table 2. Particularly notable is the strong correlation among employees in terms of a respectful attitude, mutual assistance in acquiring knowledge, and consideration of others' suggestions. The low standard deviation values of these variables allow the conclusion that employees' attitudes to the value of this variable are fairly consistent. The lowest value is attributed to the organisational level of learning (average value 3.2), except for the dimension of strategic leadership (value 3.7) and the role of leaders as promoters of organisational learning.

Irrespective of the level of organisational learning, it is worth noting that the variables measuring rewards for both individuals (2.2) and teams and groups (2.1), as well as providing time for organisational learning (2.3), had the lowest values. However, team functioning holds potential for organisational learning since this level achieved both a high overall average rating (3.4) and individual variables (formation of shared opinions – 4.2, and a focus on common tasks – 4.1).

Table 2: Arithmetic means and standard deviations of measured variables of specific levels of organisational learning in connection with the RoL

Variable	M	SD	Variable	M	SD
Employees openly discuss mistakes with the aim of learning from them. **(I)**	3.7	1.53	Two-way communication is regularly used, such as openness to suggestions, electronic exchange of ideas, and an open meeting system. **(O)**	3.5	1.37
Employees know which knowledge and skills are needed for future work tasks. **(I)**	4.4	1.29	Employees are consistently provided with quick and easy access to the information they need. **(O)**	3.4	1.42
Employees assist each other in acquiring new knowledge. **(I)**	4.6	1.16	An updated database of employees' skills and abilities is maintained. **(O)**	2.7	1.41
Employees receive payment or other resources to support learning. **(I)**	3.0	1.42	A system is in place to measure the gap between current and expected performance. **(O)**	2.4	1.25
Employees have time available specifically for learning. **(I)**	2.3	1.40	What a team learns is accessible to all employees. **(O)**	2.9	1.21
Employees see challenges that arise in their work as opportunities for learning. **(I)**	4.2	1.18	Data on the time and resources spent on training are recorded. **(O)**	3.3	1.56
Employees are rewarded for learning. **(I)**	2.2	1.12	Employees who start initiatives are recognised. **(O)**	3.4	1.44
Employees exchange feedback sincerely and openly. **(I)**	4.0	1.37	Employees have a choice in their work tasks. **(O)**	2.6	1.45
Employees listen to the suggestions of others before responding. **(I)**	4.1	1.14	Employees are invited to contribute to the organisation's vision. **(O)**	3.0	1.45
Employees are encouraged to ask "why", regardless of the position they hold. **(I)**	3.0	1.52	Employees have control over the resources they need for their work. **(O)**	2.7	1.27
Whenever employees share an opinion, they also ask what others think. **(I)**	3.7	1.45	Employees who take risks are supported. **(O)**	2.5	1.31
The relationship between employees is respectful. **(I)**	4.5	1.37	The organisation's vision is coordinated on various levels and in working groups. **(O)**	3.0	1.40
Employees take the time to establish mutual trust. **(I)**	3.8	1.31	Employees are enabled to balance their professional and family life. **(O)**	3.8	1.48
Teams/groups have the authority to adjust goals according to their needs. **(T)**	3.4	1.29	Employees are encouraged to think from a broader perspective. **(O)**	3.2	1.38
Members of teams/groups are treated equally, regardless of the position they hold, cultural, or other differences. **(T)**	3.8	1.41	Employees are encouraged to also contribute the perspectives of users in the decision-making process. **(O)**	3.0	1.30
Teams/groups are focused on the task they have and on team/group functioning. **(T)**	4.1	1.22	The impact of decisions that they could have on the well-being and work of employees is examined. **(O)**	2.7	1.30
Teams/groups can change their stance based on collective discussion or gathered information. **(T)**	4.2	1.10	Stakeholders are engaged with the aim of achieving common goals. **(O)**	3.3	1.32

| Variable	M	SD	Variable	M	SD
Teams/groups are rewarded for their achievements as a team/group. **(T)**	2.1	1.21	Employees are encouraged to seek solutions within the entire organisation when problem-solving. **(O)**	3.7	1.53
Teams/groups are confident that the organisation will operate in line with their recommendations. **(T)**	3.0	1.29	Leaders support employees' initiatives for learning and training opportunities. **(O)**	4.1	1.44
Leaders mentor and teach those who they lead. **(O)**	3.3	1.65	Leaders share with employees information on field insights, work from other organisations, and the directions of their organisation. **(O)**	3.7	1.48
Leaders constantly seek opportunities for learning. **(O)**	3.5	1.44	Leaders encourage employees to participate in realising the organisation's vision. **(O)**	3.5	1.47
Leaders ensure that the organisation's activities are in line with its values. **(O)**	3.8	1.41			

Legend: (I) – individual level, (T) – team/group level, (O) – organisational level; M – arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation; ▨ – highest values, ☐ – average values, ▨ – lowest values

Source: own analysis

The biggest share of respondents (65%) has a university education or a master's degree (second cycle of the Bologna Process), 14% have a higher vocational or university education in the first cycle of the Bologna Process, followed by 12% with a higher professional education, and 6% with a secondary vocational and high school education. For work-related learning with respect to implementing the RoL principle, most of them (69%) spend between 1 and 10 hours per month, followed by those who spend between 11 and 20 hours per month (24%), and a few who spend between 21 and 35 hours per month (4%). Only 2% of respondents spend no time on learning related to work. The correlation between both variables, i.e., education (variable y) and the number of hours of learning (variable x), was tested using Pearson's coefficient. In this regard, it was found: ρ_{xy} = 0.196; indicating a weak positive correlation between the variables. The distribution of variable values is shown in Figure 3, where the y-axis represents the level of formal education attained and the x-axis the monthly number of hours spent on work-related learning in relation to the RoL.

The results of the qualitative part of the research, which entailed an in-depth semi-structured interview with a person responsible for learning, education and training at the SWC Ljubljana, are now presented. The questions were based on the findings of the previous survey phase and focused on the ways and dimensions of organisational learning in this PA institution related to implementation of the RoL principle. They concentrated on both the organisation's level and the lawfulness, correctness and professionalism of its operations, especially in terms of ensuring the fundamental procedural rights of parties in administrative procedures. On the level of concrete administrative procedures led by public servants, they considered aspects affecting the quality, legality and correctness of procedures they conduct on a daily basis – which knowledge, skills and competencies they need and how training, support and working conditions are provided to them from this perspective in the organisation in which they are employed.

Figure 2: Pearson's correlation coefficient between level of education and number of hours of work-related learning with regard to the RoL
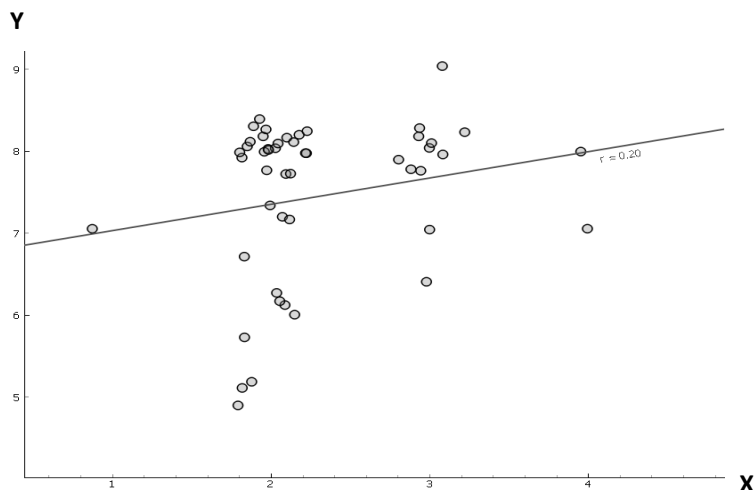
Legend: x – hours of learning per month, y – level of formal education; education level values: 5 – secondary vocational and high school, 6 – higher vocational and higher professional, 7 – higher vocational and higher university (1st cycle of the Bologna Process), 8 – university (previous) and master's degree (2nd cycle of the Bologna Process), 9 – master of science; learning hours values: 1 – 0 hours per month, 2 – from 1 to 10 hours per month, 3 – from 11 to 20 hours per month, 4 – from 21 to 35 hours per month

Source: own analysis

Table 3 highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the current state of organisational learning at the SWC Ljubljana in this respect, as well as the potential for the organisation's development in this field. Possible risks the organisation may encounter in its development are also identified, with the aim of preventing or mitigating them to the greatest extent possible.

Table 3: Analysis of organisational learning in terms of the RoL

Advantages:	Weaknesses:
- Many high-quality formal courses on legislative novelties - Refreshing courses on practical dilemmas in the administrative procedure - Identifying gaps in knowledge and selecting learning based on them - Selected courses match the challenges of the organisation - There is already a lot of professional knowledge within the organisation - Employee learning needs are recognised - Learning also for better well-being in the workplace, not just for acquiring professional knowledge - External motivation is still better than none - Awareness of the potential of key employees in the organisation - The vision of organisational learning is designed to pursue the ideal of a learning organisation - Workshops on values are conducted with the aim of shaping a shared vision	- The importance of organisational learning among employees is not recognised - The incentives for learning are mostly external - Poor reputation of the organisation in the public eye - Lack of rewards or incentives for learning - Lack of self-awareness, self-responsibility, and initiative among employees - Difficulty in motivating employees to learn - Experienced workers are leaving - Absence of an established system for knowledge transfer and the onboarding of new employees - Following the reorganisation of SWCs, knowledge and information transfer has become more difficult; the organisation is too large - Employees are not dedicated to the organisation - Lack of self-education - Work overload as an obstacle to knowledge transfer

Opportunities:	Risks:
- Internal training as a means of knowledge transfer - Mentorship system - Low costs of knowledge transfer conducted within the organisation - Individual approach to motivating employees - Consideration of employees' personal circumstances - Onboarding new employees as an investment - Non-monetary incentives are more important than monetary ones - Significant role of leadership in creating a learning organisation environment - Linking improvement of public image with organisational learning - Formulation of a shared vision contributed to by all employees	- Key employees are leaving - Failure to improve the organisation's image inhibits all other opportunities - Not all employees are capable of recognising the importance of initiative and continuous learning, as well as knowledge transfer - Being overloaded with current tasks does not motivate learning and hinders knowledge transfer - The development of organisational learning is a process that can take several years

Source: own analysis

Both the survey results and the interview reveal the main shortcomings of organisational learning at the SWC Ljubljana, such as insufficient rewards, incentives, and motivation for learning, inadequate employee identification with the organisation, and its low public reputation. However, as opportunities for the development of organisational learning, the significant potential held by teamwork and the important role of leaders in encouraging employees to learn, collaborate and share ideas can be highlighted.

5   Discussion

The results show that in the studied organisation, the SWC Ljubljana, the individual level of organisational learning is the most developed in implementation of the RoL principle. Gould (2000) also emphasises that organisational learning in social welfare organisations is primarily based on the individual level. This is justified by the fact that in this field, the conventional learning model is built on reflective learning, which operates in cycles of reflection and conceptualisation, enabling experimentation and action learning focused on the individual rather than the group or organisational level. While continuous learning on the individual level is necessary and beneficial, on its own it is not sufficient for changes in behaviour and organisational performance, especially concerning adherence to the principles of democratic governance of administrative relations between authorities and parties in procedures. According to the findings of Kovač (2020), in order to achieve this it is necessary to ensure a closed regulatory loop. Administrative processes do not solely take place on the level of individual procedures conducted by these employees; instead, this is just one of the many steps in the cycle. Learning must accordingly be integrated into all of the organisation's systems, its entire operation, and all the structures to enable knowledge sharing and transfer among organisation members regularly used for improvements and positive changes in its operation (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). Among the specific dimensions of organisational learning at the SWC Ljubljana, the most developed are those related to the individual level of learning; namely, promoting inquiry and dialogue, and creating continuous learning opportunities. On top of these, the dimension of strategic leadership is highly developed which, due to its prominent role in organisational learning, holds the potential to connect individuals within the organisation and simultaneously develop systemic and strategic solutions on the organisational level. In contrast, the weakest dimensions are

encouraging or empowering employees towards a common vision and establishing systems for capturing and transferring knowledge. The fact that the results indicate that all dimensions of organisational learning are present in implementation of the RoL principle in the administrative practice of the SWC Ljubljana, but they differ in terms of their development, means that hypothesis H1 set out in the introduction can be confirmed.

The research identifies one of the biggest obstacles to learning at the SWC Ljubljana as the lack of connection between individuals and the organisation. Employees poorly identify themselves with the organisation, and the situation was exacerbated by the SWCs' reorganisation in 2018 when the 62 previously independent SWCs were merged into 16 new ones. This reorganisation was a significant change in the SWC's organisational structure, and the results indicate that a shared vision has not yet been established, and employees do not (yet) identify with the organisation. In the PA, it is essential that both managers and employees continuously develop new knowledge management skills, lifelong learning and, above all, collectively shape the organisation's vision. Only then can a learning culture be established within the organisation, leading to a positive attitude and a clear vision towards the goal of becoming a learning organisation (Antonovici, 2020). Gould (2000) believes that the vision of social welfare organisations must also consider the so-called organisational memory, which includes a database of all of the organisation's current activities as well as an archive of past experiences, stakeholder collaboration, knowledge dissemination promotion, and a continuous evaluation of past projects and actions. Similarly, Goh (1998) underscores the 'shared experience' or common framework or shared theory of operation among members of the organisation, in which a learning organisation must invest deliberately to enable the development and progress of teams and groups. Therefore, in the analysed case of the SWC Ljubljana it can facilitate the connection of individuals with the organisation, enabling teamwork as an intermediary. This is particularly important while pursuing the fundamental democratic principles in the procedures conducted by these institutions. As highlighted by Kovač and Bileišis (2017), there are tendencies in Slovenian and other related administrative environments of former socialist systems in Central and Eastern Europe to create highly bureaucratised public administrations, as a product of the low levels of trust in society (both political and social). In order to circumvent this, pursuing these principles along with organisational learning in PA organisations is expected to contribute to the optimal implementation of structural reforms based on the strategic public policies of this region. The key here is the awareness that good governance principles with effective public policies and the lawful conduct of administrative procedures are complementary, not exclusive concepts (Kovač, 2020).

Moreover, another of the key obstacles in the analysed organisation is that systems for capturing and transferring knowledge have not been established. Although there is a wealth of knowledge within the organisation, and employees participate in training, all knowledge transfer occurs haphazardly and unsystematically. Particularly problematic is the lack of a mentorship system for new employees, as well as the insufficient attention paid to retaining successful and experienced staff. As a hierarchically structured organisation, the SWCs do not devote enough attention to information transfer and open, two-way communication, which should occur on all levels of the organisation. Gould (2000) also emphasises that in social welfare organisations knowledge that becomes "collective consciousness" and is present in the organisation as tacit knowledge is often underutilised in terms of knowledge transfer, partly because employees often believe that there is a hierarchy of knowledge within the organisation which prevents knowledge transfer

and idea sharing. This can be overcome at the SWC Ljubljana by creating an open climate of collaboration, openness, idea sharing, and more intentional methods, such as by establishing a knowledge transfer system through mentoring, internal training, reporting on lessons learned etc. In the process, it is important that due to the legal determination of social institutions this transfer of knowledge does not solely pertain to the understanding of legal rules as a mere formality, but as understanding the norms and legal relations in terms of fundamental societal values, such as democracy, the separation of powers, equality, protection etc., which represent the common interest of society as a whole (Kovač, 2020).

Some studies (e.g., Weldy & Gillis, 2010) also indicate that leaders hold a different view of the organisation than employees; leaders typically perceive the organisation is more successful than the employees do. Within organisational learning, they view the crucial transfer of information from leaders to employees and vice versa since this assures that everyone is informed about each other's perspectives, as they all together make up the organisation. Learning must occur on all levels: vertically and horizontally. Leaders also perceive the incentives and rewards they give to employees differently and more positively than the employees evaluate them. However, in this study, given the small number of leaders included, this facet could not be verified.

Since organisations are made up of individuals who form part of them, it is important that each employee be aware of the importance of organisational learning, for both their own development and progress and for the development of the organisation they are part of. While the research results reveal that the organisational level of learning is not sufficiently developed, there is also little awareness among the employees concerning what and how they could contribute to organisational learning. Each individual's contribution to collective learning is important. Organisational learning should focus on all employees in the organisation, regardless of their level of education or position they hold. This is also seen in the research results as the correlation between the number of hours of learning employees engage in regarding their work and their formal education is weak. Hypothesis 2 may thus be rejected.

For improving individual learning dimensions, regular, open and particularly two-way communication among employees is more critical than achieving employees' formal learning (Weldy & Gillis, 2010), and such communication can overcome otherwise rigid barriers to communication in hierarchically structured organisations (Serrat, 2017), such as the SWC Ljubljana. Goh (1998) further emphasises that to ensure such a conducive environment leaders must be able to transcend the boundaries of traditional hierarchical organisations, characteristic of Slovenian SWCs as well, and assume the role of coaches rather than supervisors in the organisation, guiding employees towards a common goal. In this context, the individual's position in the organisation is not important; their contribution to development and progress is. The role of leaders in this is not supervisory but instead involves providing feedback to individuals and teams so that they can recognise the needs and opportunities for change – leaders act as change agents. Serrat (2017) highlights that learning organisations themselves promote leadership competencies on all levels of the organisation and not just among (top) leaders because leadership is understood as a beneficial skill stemming from knowledge, skills and experience, rather than merely from an individual's current position in the organisation.

While the study results reveal weaknesses in organisational learning at the SWC Ljubljana, they also indicate potential areas that should be exploited as solutions to overcome certain obstacles. Considering that teamwork is well developed in the organisation, providing employees with connectivity, seeking common solutions, while also providing sufficient autonomy for teams to form their own views based on group discussions, the solution to establishing a connection between individuals and the organisation lies in team learning as it serves as a link between individuals and the organisation. This enables individuals to learn together as an organisation, actively examine the characteristics of the organisation's external and internal environment, while permitting the organisation to proactively shape responses to the challenges it faces (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). Other authors (Goh, 1998; Gould, 2000; Serrat, 2017) also note that teamwork is an important approach that considerably facilitates learning and knowledge transfer in the organisation. Goh (1998) stresses that for successful learning organisations it is essential that learning from mistakes, learning from competitors, and learning within all parts of the organisation are not only allowed but also encouraged. Given that teams in the analysed organisation are enabled to form their own views based on previous group discussions, teamwork is encouraged, and opportunities exist.

Accordingly, in terms of RoL implementation in cases involving social rights the above findings should be considered on both normative and implementation levels at the cross-section between the RoL and the welfare state rather than perceiving the constitutional guarantees as administrative barriers and the rules as an excuse for bureaucratism (Kovač, 2020). In this sense, as underscored by Galetta et al. (2015), both state officials and decision-makers must prioritise the objectives of equal treatment and non-discrimination, which are crucial elements of administrative actions stemming from the RoL and the principles of efficient and independent European administration.

6   Conclusion

With the aim of meeting the demanding challenges of numerous stakeholders, PA organisations are constantly learning and adapting their operations to environmental demands. The essence of administrative reforms lies precisely in focusing on service users, becoming increasingly more adaptable and centred on individual citizen needs. In this regard, SWCs as holders of public authority, which deal with the most sensitive aspects of individuals' lives, their difficulties, and problems in their day-to-day functioning, constantly alter their services, approaches and work methods. They simultaneously uphold the principle of the RoL, reflected in legality, legal certainty, and the protection of legitimate interests in (social) administrative procedures. This raises the question of how organisational learning occurs at SWCs, which dimensions are emphasised the most, what the risks are, and where opportunities can be identified to enable the development of such organisations as learning organisations. The results indicate that the individual level of organisational learning predominates, while the organisational level is the least developed. Teamwork and the active role of leaders are solutions that would enhance the connectivity between individuals and the organisation, given that a shared identity, the co-creation of solutions, and the distribution of power and responsibility are vital for the development of an open and creative environment that facilitates the development of continuous learning within the organisation.

The results confirmed that individual dimensions of organisational learning in relation to the RoL have been developed differently at the SWC Ljubljana, especially those related to collaboration among employees, mutual

assistance in knowledge transfer, respectfulness, openness to others' opinions, open communication, and teamwork. While formal training is well taken care of on the organisational level, there is a lack of incentives, rewards, and motivation for employees to learn. Likewise, there is no systematically organised knowledge transfer, which could stimulate the development of knowledge transfer at least in the initial phase from the perspective of external motivation. In this context, the self-initiative and curiosity of employees are of crucial importance, with the research results not confirming that the time employees spend on work-related learning is related to their level of formal education. For the further development of organisational learning at the SWC Ljubljana, as well as other comparable public institutions, it is essential that employees first identify with the organisation to feel part of it. Following the reorganisation of the SWC in 2018, the first challenge should have been to assure the connection of employees with the (new) organisation, which can be achieved by involving employees in decision-making, transferring information on all organisational levels, vertically and horizontally, forming a shared vision and development strategies, more teamwork, and dedicating more time and space exclusively to acquiring, sharing and creating new knowledge. Alongside the above, it is advised to pay more attention to research on organisational learning at SWCs concerning the RoL, as this area is poorly researched and hence there are also no analyses of the current situation that would enable the definition of SWCs' goals as learning organisations and the activities needed to achieve them.

This study has some limitations that should be noted. It is based on a case study of a specific Slovenian public institution. Therefore, for the purpose of comparing results and conducting more detailed research on particular facets of organisational learning in relation to administrative reforms and the RoL research on other institutions in both the social and broader administrative fields in Slovenia as well as the wider European area would be fruitful. It would also be useful to explore in detail the connections between various facets of the effectiveness and efficiency of these organisations in the context of the RoL relative to their organisational learning. Despite these limitations, this research provides insights into important aspects of implementing the (sub)principles of the RoL in the enforcement of administrative reforms and the associated organisational learning as part of public organisations' response to changes in their external environment. By integrating well-established concepts from administrative and organisational theory, this article contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice in the administrative-legal and organisational aspects of the functioning of public institutions in the European administrative area.

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