The Role of the Administrative Consultation Platform in the Development of Legal Competences of Public Officials and their Lifelong Professional Learning

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of the Administrative Consultation Platform (ACP) in the development of legal competences and lifelong professional learning of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in the Slovenian public administration, based on the aforehand survey and its verification through focus group interviews and case studies. The research focuses on the question: how the use of ACP contributes to the development of technical-legal, but also entrepreneurial and relational competences of public officials as essential for effective administrative decision-making in accordance with the General Administrative Procedure Act (GAPA). The theoretical part of the study is based on normative, legal-dogmatic and human resource management competence model research methods. The empirical part consists of a case study analysis and the evaluation of a focus group discussion. The qualitative findings, based on a focus group with seven experienced public officials who used ACP between 2023 and 2025, indicate that the use of ACP contributed to the development of all three groups of competences, particularly technical-legal competences, such as resolving procedural problems, understanding the GAPA and sector-specific procedural rules, and applying general legal rules to specific cases. The results also show improvements in entrepreneurial competences, such as respect for fundamental ethical principles and proactive problem-solving while balancing the public interest and the rights of the parties. Furthermore, relational competences were strengthened, particularly effective and respectful communication with participants in administrative procedures and the ability to learn. In addition to supporting the conduct of administrative procedures and the development of legal competences, ACP also represents a form of non-formal learning that significantly contributes to the lifelong professional learning of public officials in the Slovenian public administration. This study can therefore serve as a role model for similar projects in other countries.

Keywords: administrative consultation platform (ACP), lifelong professional learning, conceptual competence framework, legal competences in public administration

1 Introduction

In modern public administration, administrative procedures represent a core process of public governance, aimed at resolving conflicts between the public interest and the rights of individual parties (Pečarič & Stare, 2021; Galetta & Ziller, 2024). Administrative procedures are a core process of public governance, aimed at resolving conflicts between the public interest and the rights of individual parties. When conducting administrative procedures, public officials decide unilaterally on the rights, legal interest and obligation of individual parties, so they should be able to exercise legal, communication and ethical skills as well as various other competences. Above all, they need to understand and reason accordingly how to apply abstract rules to individual set of factual circumstances in order to issue legally sound decisions at the end of proceedings. Officials must be professionally qualified, especially possessing sufficiently developed legal competences to effectively protect legal interests in administrative matters (Kovač, 2024). Public officials conducting these procedures in Slovenia are subject to substantive law, procedural rules in sector-specific statutes and subsidiary the General Administrative Procedure Act (GAPA) in various domains (e.g., migration, taxation, construction, social affairs)

However, numerous dilemmas arise in the implementation of the GAPA due to inconsistencies in sector-specific legislation and the evolution of administrative relations over time. The Administration Consultation Platform (ACP) was established to address these dilemmas, by the Faculty of Public Administration and the Ministry of Public Administration (MPA) in 2009, and renewed in 2023, with the purpose of providing authoritative interpretative guidance on the GAPA. Between 2009 and (the beginning of) 2026, more than 1,400 questions have been answered in a Q&A format, publicly accessible to a broad range of public officials and other users.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the use of the ACP on the development of legal competences of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in Slovenia, and to explore how ACP contributes to strengthening their lifelong professional learning. The objectives of the paper are twofold: 1) to examine the impact of ACP on the development of legal competences of public officials in accordance with the Conceptual Framework

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of Legal Competences, and 2) to evaluate the role and significance of ACP in strengthening the lifelong professional learning of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in Slovenia. The core research question (RQ) is: How does the use of the ACP affect the development of legal competences of public officials conducting administrative procedures in Slovenia, and how does it contribute to strengthening their lifelong learning and professional development?

The theoretical part of this paper is based on normative, legal-dogmatic, and HRM competence models research methods. The empirical research comprises case study analysis, and evaluation of focus group discussion and further operational measures. These outputs are considered through the lens of lifelong learning and professional development of public officials in Slovenian public administration as a role model also for other countries in the region.

The main contribution of this study is to define the significance of the ACP from the perspective of the development of legal competences of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in Slovenia, as well as from the perspective of strengthening their lifelong professional learning. The qualitative analysis conducted in this study provides a basis for further research on the importance of developing legal and other competences of public officials in public administration. However, the results can also be applicable in similar projects in the neighboring countries, that share legal regulation on administrative procedures, comparable to the Slovenian GAPA, such as Croatia, Hungary and others.

2 The Doctrinal View of Legal Competences from the Public Officials´ Lifelong Professional Learning Perspective

Public officials who conduct administrative procedures in the Slovenian public administration and decide on the rights, obligations or legal interests of individuals, legal entities or other parties must continuously develop their competences. In particular, Article 31 of the GAPA specifies the conditions that officials must fulfil in order to conduct administrative procedures, including employment with the competent authority, appropriate education, a professional examination in administrative procedures, authorization to perform certain acts within the administrative procedure or to decide on the case, and impartiality, which represents an interplay of legal and ethical components (Kovač & Jerovšek, 2024; Kovač, 2018). However, in a modern and increasingly complex public administration, public officials are also expected to recognise the importance of lifelong learning and to continuously improve their professional knowledge and competences.

2.1 Developing legal competences among public officials

When conducting administrative procedures, public officials must possess and further develop legal competences, understood as the competences that enable individuals, based on legal rules and through legal actions, to change their own legal position as well as the position of others within the legal system (Villa-Rosas & Spaak, 2023). A review of existing research (Bedner et al., 2020; Finch & Fafinski, 2020; Carrel, 2019, 2021; Gerkman & Cornett, 2016; Isaacs et al., 2016; Hamilton, 2014; Hamilton & Bilionis, 2022; Shultz & Zedeck, 2011) shows that legal competences are primarily developed by students during their legal education. One of the few studies examining this issue in the context of public administration (Kovač & Stare, 2014) shows that such competences can also be developed by students of public administration. After graduation, when individuals become employed as public officials, legal competences are typically further developed through professional practice and using the ACP (Mar et al., 2025).

Some authors (Bedner et al., 2020; Finch & Fafinski, 2020; Gerkman & Cornett, 2016; Isaacs et al., 2016; Kovač & Stare, 2014) have examined legal competences primarily among students or graduates of law and public administration. Bedner et al. (2020) argue that law students should acquire three groups of competences: general skills (e.g., critical thinking and analytical skills), primary legal skills (e.g., case analysis and legal reasoning), and secondary legal skills (e.g., legal writing, presenting legal arguments, and the ability to understand and apply the law). These legal competences enable graduates to pursue professional careers as lawyers, judges or public officials and to further develop their knowledge through legal practice. Similarly, Finch and Fafinski (2020) identify several key legal competences of law graduates, including knowledge of sources of law (e.g., understanding legislation and the ability to find and use legislation and case law), academic legal skills (e.g., legal writing, avoiding plagiarism, and problem solving), and practical legal skills (e.g., presentation and negotiation skills). However, Gerkman and Cornett (2016) find that law students do not sufficiently develop certain professional competences, such as integrity, work ethic and resilience. To better prepare students for the labour market and the expectations of future employers, they propose the use of the conceptual framework The Whole Lawyer, which focuses on the development of professional competence (e.g., professionalism, emotional intelligence and communication). Through professional practice, graduates are expected to further develop legal skills (e.g., transactional practice,

litigation practice and legal thinking) as well as additional aspects of professional competences, such as professional development, workload management and collaboration with others.

Within the Tuning project, specifically in the framework of TuCAHEA, a set of competences that should be acquired during university studies to harmonise European study programmes in law and public administration was defined (Isaac et al., 2016; Krogt et al., 2012). These competences include general competences (e.g., the ability to apply knowledge in practice, the ability to learn, critical thinking and problem-solving) and subject-specific competences (e.g., knowledge of current norms, statutes, regulations and other sources of law, the ability to apply national and international legal instruments to protect and promote human rights, and the ability to draft legal documents). As part of the same project, Kovač and Stare (2014) examined the development of competences among public administration students who participated in the ACP between 2009 and 2014. The study showed that using ACP students developed several competences, particularly the ability to apply knowledge in practical situations, knowledge and understanding of the subject area, determination and perseverance in performing tasks, basic general knowledge in the field of study, and the ability to search for, process and analyze information. These findings were also considered when ACP was reintroduced in 2022 (Kovač et al., 2023).

Other authors have examined legal competences of students and legal professionals (e.g., lawyers, judges and academics) through different competence models (Carrel, 2019, 2021; Hamilton, 2014; Hamilton & Bilionis, 2022). One of the best-known frameworks is the T-shaped Lawyer model, which conceptualizes the modern legal professional adaptable to change, capable of working across different areas of law, client-oriented, socially and relationally competent, technologically aware and guided by ethical standards (Carrel, 2019, 2021). Building on the limitations of this model, Carrel developed the Delta Model of Lawyer Competence, which has been further refined over time. The model identifies three clusters of competences: Legal Knowledge and Skills (e.g., legal analysis, legal judgment and legal research), Personal Effectiveness Skills (e.g., emotional intelligence, relationship management and communication), and Process, Data and Technology (e.g., technology use, data analytics and data security). This model emphasizes that legal professionals should systematically develop their competences throughout professional practice.

Similarly, Hamilton conceptualized legal competences of law students through technical legal competences (e.g., knowledge of doctrinal law, legal analysis and written and oral communication) and other professional competences (e.g., integrity, honesty, problem solving, work ethic and dedication to client service) (Hamilton, 2014). Building on this work, Hamilton and Bilionis (2022) developed the Foundational Competences Model, which distinguishes three groups of competences: traditional technical legal competences, client-centered relational competences, and competences related to problem solving and professional development. According to this model, these competences should be continuously developed through lifelong learning. While these studies mainly focus on law students and legal professionals, research on legal competences of public officials remains limited. To address this gap, a Conceptual framework of legal competences was developed within a research project (Mar et al., 2025). The framework builds on the three-dimensional structure of the Foundational Competences Model (Hamilton & Bilionis, 2022) and the TuCAHEA/Tuning approach (Isaacs et al., 2016) and distinguishes three dimensions of competences: technical-legal, entrepreneurial, and relational competences, each including both subject-specific and general competences.

Technical-legal competences include understanding the GAPA and sector-specific procedures, familiarity with administrative case law on procedural rules, analytical thinking when solving administrative problems, and the ability to apply general legal rules to specific cases, as well as awareness of the legal regulation of personal data processing and digital content. Entrepreneurial competences include respect for fundamental ethical principles (integrity, impartiality and confidentiality), accuracy in performing procedural actions and proactive problem solving aimed at balancing the public interest and the rights of the parties. Relational competences include effective and respectful communication with participants in administrative procedures, also to enable protection of their rights, a client-oriented approach, the ability to identify the legal interests of the parties and the ability to learn.

These competences encompass both substantive and procedural aspects of law. Therefore, students of public administration who intend to work as future public officials should begin developing them during their studies. At the same time, once employed as public officials, they should continue strengthening them through professional practice and the use of ACP, which supports their lifelong professional learning (Mar et al., 2025). As emphasized in previous research, the development of legal competences among legal professionals and public officials can be effectively supported through lifelong professional learning (Hamilton & Bilionis, 2022; Mar et al., 2025).

2.2 Lifelong professional learning of public officials

Changes in public administration require public officials to continuously adapt by strengthening their competences through lifelong learning. Lifelong learning encompasses learning activities undertaken throughout an individual's life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences in personal, civic, social and employment-related contexts (European Commission, 2019; Eurostat, 2026). In 2019, the European Commission identified eight key competences for lifelong learning, which individuals, including public officials, should develop through formal, non-formal and informal learning in different environments such as family, education and the workplace. These competences include literacy, multilingual competence, mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering, digital competence, personal and social competence and learning to learn, citizenship competence, entrepreneurship competence, and cultural awareness and expression (European Commission, 2019). Among these, citizenship competence overlaps with several legal competences identified in previous research (Isaacs et al., 2016; Hamilton, 2014; Mar et al., 2025), particularly critical thinking, problem solving, the ability to develop arguments, constructive participation and democratic decision-making. Particularly enabling active participation of parties to the procedure by officials is not only a formal procedural guarantee but a mechanism that enhances both the legitimacy and the quality of administrative decisions (Barnes, 2008).

The European Union (EU) and several Member States promote lifelong learning of public officials in various ways (Eurydice, 2026). In Spain, competence development is encouraged through training programmes organized at national, regional and local levels. In Greece, lifelong learning of public officials is supported through non-formal education provided by the National Centre for Public Administration. Croatia focuses particularly on developing digital competences of public officials as part of the digitalization of public administration, while in Luxembourg lifelong learning is promoted through the Chamber of Civil Servants and Public Employees. In Slovakia, an education information system under the Ministry of Education provides public officials with free access to training programmes offered by educational institutions and accredited providers (Eurydice, 2026).

In Slovenia, lifelong professional learning is supported through several strategic documents, including the Lifelong Learning Strategy (2007) and the Public Administration Development Strategy 2015–2020. Within this framework, various training programmes are organized to strengthen the competences of public officials, for example through the Administration Academy operating under the Ministry of Public Administration (GOV.si, 2026; OECD, 2018). In addition, a competency model for public administration was introduced in 2019 as a tool for identifying and developing competences of public officials and for supporting human resource management processes such as recruitment, training, career development and succession planning, and was further upgrade in 2025 (Arzenšek et al., 2025). However, experience shows that public officials who conduct administrative procedures in Slovenian public administration also develop their competences through informal lifelong learning, particularly using ACP, which serves as an important professional support tool in their daily work.

3 Methodological Outline

Although public officials largely acquire legal competences during law or public administration study programmes at the faculties, lawful and effective conduct of administrative procedures, as well as lifelong professional learning, require continuous strengthening and further development of such competences. A research project was initiated in 2025 to examine which legal competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes) are the most relevant in the context of the ACP (Mar et al., 2025). Preliminary findings based on a survey among 112 users of the ACP in 2023–2025 of a research project indicate a significant contribution to the development and strengthening of legal competences. Contrary, in accordance with the Conceptual Framework of Legal Competences, public officials demonstrate lower or varying degrees of development of technical-legal, entrepreneurial and relational competences. To further examine these issues, additional qualitative methods were applied, particularly a systematic analysis of cases, identifying which legal norms are most frequently the subject of interpretative uncertainty. Also, several focus group sessions were conducted in autumn 2025, upon which a webinar was designed to further address the most important legal competences supporting the ACP as a mechanism of continuous professional development of public officials.

3.1 Data collection and sample

The study examining the impact of the use of ACP on the development of legal competences of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in Slovenia was carried out within a research project using a mixed-methods approach. First, a survey was conducted, followed by a qualitative study. Such approaches are becoming increasingly important in administrative research, as they enable a broader and more in-depth understanding of the research problem (Hendren et al., 2023). Table 1 presents the research design applied in the project.

Table 1: Research design of the research project

1.	Definition of the research area, focusing on the impact of ACP on the development of legal competences of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in Slovenia and who used ACP between 2023 and 2025.
2.	Review of relevant literature on legal competences and the work of public officials, followed by the development of a Conceptual framework of legal competences.
3.	Survey examining the level of development of legal competences among 112 public officials who used ACP between 2023 and 2025. Data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire based on the Conceptual framework of legal competences.
4.	Qualitative research, including the preparation, implementation and analysis of a focus group discussion with seven invited public officials, conducted based on the results obtained from the prior analysis.
5.	Evaluation of the contribution of ACP to academic knowledge and professional practice, particularly regarding the development of legal competences of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in the Slovenian public administration.

Source: own (2025)

According to the research design presented in Table 1, the first step involved defining the research area. Given the assumption that ACP influences the development of legal competences of public officials, the study initially focused on reviewing the relevant scientific literature on legal competences of public officials. Since previous research has mainly examined legal competences of law students and legal professionals, a Conceptual framework of legal competences was developed for the purposes of this study (Mar et al., 2025; Novak et al., 2025). Based on this framework, a questionnaire was developed and structured into several sections. The section on legal competences consisted of three dimensions with a total of 32 items: 1) technical-legal competences, including understanding of the GAPA and sector-specific procedures, knowledge of administrative case law on procedural rules, analytical thinking when solving administrative problems, legal reasoning when solving procedural problems, application of general legal rules to specific cases, and awareness that personal data processing and digital content are regulated by law; 2) entrepreneurial legal competences, including respect for fundamental ethical principles (integrity, impartiality and confidentiality), accuracy in conducting administrative procedures, and proactive solution-seeking while balancing the public interest and the rights of the parties; and 3) relational legal competences, including effective and respectful communication with participants in administrative procedures and parties, a party-centered approach, the ability to identify the legal interests of parties in individual cases, and the ability to learn. Respondents assessed the impact of ACP on the development of these competences using two five-point Likert scales (1 – none to 5 – completely), indicating the level of development of each competence before using ACP and after using ACP. The questionnaire was implemented using the online survey tool 1KA, and data were collected between March and April 2025 from 112 public officials who conduct administrative procedures in the Slovenian public administration and used ACP between 2023 and 2025.

The results of the survey with 112 public officials as respondents show that the use of ACP was associated with substantial improvements in technical-legal, entrepreneurial and relational competences among public officials responsible for conducting administrative procedures. Within the technical-legal competences, respondents reported the greatest improvement in legal reasoning when solving procedural problems, which increased from 3.47 to 4.07. Improvements were also observed in understanding the GAPA and sector-specific procedures (from 3.59 to 3.97), familiarity with administrative case law on procedural rules (from 3.23 to 3.71), and analytical thinking when solving administrative problems (from 3.45 to 3.82). A particularly notable improvement was observed in the competence to apply general legal rules to specific cases, which increased from 3.64 to 4.05. Respondents also reported improvements in their awareness that the processing of personal data is regulated by law (from 4.21 to 4.26) and that digital content is protected by copyright law (from 3.47 to 3.95). Regarding the entrepreneurial legal competences, the largest improvement was observed in the competence to perform actions accurately when conducting administrative procedures (from 3.99 to 4.32). Respondents also improved their ability to respect fundamental ethical principles (integrity, impartiality and confidentiality) when performing duties or conducting administrative procedures (from 3.47 to 4.23) and to proactively seek solutions while balancing the public interest and the rights of the parties (from 3.73 to 4.05). The use of ACP also contributed to the development of relational competences. The most notable improvement was observed in the competence to identify the legal interests of the parties in individual cases (from 3.95 to 4.11). Smaller improvements were observed in effective communication with participants in the administrative procedure (from 3.85 to 4.03), a focus on the parties (from 4.16 to 4.22), and the ability to learn (from 4.07 to 4.23). Interestingly, respondents already reported a very high level of development of the competence to communicate respectfully with parties before using ACP (M = 4.38), and therefore this competence did not show further improvement after the use of ACP.

3.2 Participants and procedure

Based on the results of the survey analysis, the next phase involved conducting a qualitative study. The qualitative research of focus group was designed as a complement to the previously conducted survey to strengthen the reliability and validity of the findings. For the focus group discussion, six questions were developed. These questions were conceptually aligned with the questions and statements included in the questionnaire used in the survey. This alignment enabled the comparability of findings and provided a deeper understanding of how the use of ACP influences the development of legal competences (technical-legal, entrepreneurial and relational competences) of public officials and how it contributes to their lifelong professional learning. The first question focused on how public officials in state authorities use ACP and whether ACP contributes to the development of legal competences among them and their colleagues. The second question addressed when public officials should acquire legal competences (e.g., during their studies) and how these competences should be developed (e.g., through professional practice or using ACP). The third question consisted of two sub-questions. In the first sub-question, participants were asked to identify one or two legal competences (technical-legal, entrepreneurial or relational) from the questionnaire that they had significantly developed during the previous year due to the use of ACP and to provide an example from their professional practice in conducting administrative procedures. In the second sub-question, participants were asked to identify one or two legal competences that had already been well developed before and had not significantly improved due to the use of ACP, again providing examples from their professional practice. The fourth question aimed to explore participants' views on how the use of ACP contributes to the development of their digital competences. Since this question did not relate directly to legal competences, it was excluded from the subsequent analysis. The fifth question focused on the frequency of use of ACP and the participants' attitudes towards its usefulness in their professional work. The sixth question aimed to gather participants' suggestions for improving ACP as an online platform in ways that could further support the development of their legal and digital competences. In the analysis of responses to the sixth question, aspects related to digital competences were excluded.

Public officials who conduct administrative procedures in Slovenia, are active users of ACP and had participated in the previous survey on legal competences were invited to participate in the focus group. Eleven public officials were selected based on demographic indicators obtained in the survey. According to the employing organization, the largest share of public officials (52.3%) was employed in administrative units, followed by those working in ministries and their constituent bodies (14%), while 5.8% were employed in municipal inspectorates and inspectorates at the national level. Regarding the area of activity, the largest proportion of public officials (17.4%) conducted administrative procedures in the fields of construction, environment and agriculture, followed by internal affairs (13.0%), social affairs (5.4%), and education and taxation (2.2%). All six prepared questions were sent to the invited public officials in advance so that they could prepare for the semi-structured interviews. Seven public officials confirmed their participation in the focus group. Among them, four were employed in administrative units, one in a ministry, one in a national inspectorate and one in a municipal inspectorate.

The focus group session with seven participants was conducted in autumn 2025 and lasted approximately two hours, based on individual and group prior preparatory communication. Five participants, employed in administrative units and the national inspectorate, participated in person, while two participants from the ministry and the municipal inspectorate joined online via Zoom. The administrative bodies that participants came from reflect the most common users of the ACP, which we verified in advance as well as to invite individual participants from different levels, some managerial and some directly conducting (mostly complex) administrative procedures. Thus, we aimed to consider the optimal representation in order to be able to extrapolate our findings. The participants' responses were audio-recorded and simultaneously documented in September and October 2025.

The analysis of the focus group data followed a coding procedure carried out in the following weeks, which involved assigning concepts to statements made during the interviews. The analysis included open, axial and selective coding, followed by the definition of categories and the development of a tentative theory (Mesec, 2023). During transcription, all responses were anonymized. Participants were labelled with letters (A, B, C, D, E, F and G), and all personal and organizational identifiers were removed. The prepared transcripts served as the basis for open, axial and selective coding conducted in MS Excel. Based on the identified codes, categories were defined and a tentative theory was developed, which is presented in the following section. These results are the basis for upgrading the ACP in terms of more smooth development of the most important (legal) competences of the ACP users in 2026.

4 Results of the Focus Group Discussion on the Lifelong Learning and the Development of Legal Competences through ACP

The qualitative findings provide insight into how the use of ACP contributes to the development of legal competences of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in the Slovenian public administration. Through the thematic analysis and coding of focus group responses to five questions, seven categories were identified. These categories reflect the different ways in which the use of ACP supports the development of legal competences and thereby contributes to strengthening the lifelong professional learning of public officials. The identified categories and their corresponding codes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Categories and codes identified from focus group responses

Category	Codes
1. Development of legal competences using ACP	Technical-legal competences, entrepreneurial competences and relational competences; legal reasoning when solving procedural problems; to understand the GAPA and sector-specific procedures; knowledge of legal terminology; analytical thinking when solving administrative problems; application of general legal rules to specific cases; better establishing the facts of the case; better reasoning of administrative decisions, understanding of administrative case law; to respect fundamental ethical principles when performing duties or conducting administrative procedures; to communicate effectively with participants in the administrative procedure; to communicate respectfully with parties; to focus on the parties; identify the legal interests of the parties in individual cases; ability to learn.
2. Support of ACP in conducting administrative procedures	Rapid search for solutions; answers to specific questions; resolving more complex administrative procedures; use of ACP in cases of uncertainty or dilemma; similar cases available on ACP; reviewing cases on ACP; decision-making support; use of ACP when conducting administrative procedures; facilitating decision-making; everything in one place; high-quality content; credible source of information.
3. Learning and professional development	Learning through case-based examples; lifelong learning; monitoring developments in the professional field; preparation for the professional examination in administrative procedure; acquisition of new knowledge.
4. Collaboration and knowledge sharing	Discussions among colleagues; brainstorming; sharing experiences among colleagues; open communication among employees; proactive problem solving.
5. Role of supervisors	Supervisors' encouragement (or lack thereof) regarding the use of ACP; supervisors' awareness of ACP use; and their support for the development of employees' legal competences.
6. Differences among public officials	Different educational backgrounds of employees; older employees finding it more difficult to use ACP; younger employees using ACP more easily; (lack of) awareness of ACP among some employees; ACP as a useful tool in mentoring and onboarding.
7. Suggestions for improving ACP	Introduction of artificial intelligence tools; establishing ACP as a mandatory professional resource; improving the search functionality on ACP.

Source: own (2026)

The results of the qualitative analysis of the focus group responses reveal several aspects of how the use of ACP contributes to the development of legal competences and strengthens the lifelong professional learning of public officials who conduct administrative procedures in Slovenia (Table 2). Seven categories were identified: (1) Development of legal competences using ACP, (2) Support of ACP in conducting administrative procedures, (3) Learning and professional development, (4) Collaboration and knowledge sharing, (5) The role of supervisors, (6) Differences among public officials, and (7) Suggestions for improving ACP.

The interviewees emphasized that ACP significantly contributes to the development of their legal competences. They highlighted the development of technical-legal competences, especially legal reasoning when solving procedural problems (*A: Using ACP makes it easier to justify solutions; E: ACP teaches us better legal reasoning; B: Legal reasoning is essential.).* Participants also reported improved understanding of the GAPA and sector-specific procedural rules (*C: The act and regulations become clearer.).* They noted that ACP helped them improve their legal practice and develop legal terminology, although the level of this competence depended on their educational background and professional experience in conducting administrative procedures. Colleagues without formal education in law or public administration were reported to have less developed legal terminology, although

younger employees often improve it using ACP. ACP was also reported to support analytical thinking when solving administrative problems, enabling officials to better apply legal rules in individual administrative cases and to provide clearer reasoning for their decisions. Interviewees also emphasized improvements in establishing the facts of the case and providing well-reasoned administrative decisions (*E: ACP leads us to better legal reasoning, better decisions, better established facts and higher-quality reasoning of decisions*). The code establishing the facts of the case reflects the development of analytical thinking and the ability to apply general legal rules to specific administrative cases.

Regarding entrepreneurial competences, interviewees noted that the use of ACP improved their respect for fundamental ethical principles, such as integrity, impartiality and confidentiality, when conducting administrative procedures. The development of relational competences was also highlighted. Participants reported improvements in respectful communication with participants in administrative procedures, a stronger focus on the parties, and a better ability to identify the legal interests of the parties. ACP also encouraged continuous learning (*E: ACP encourages broader thinking; G: ACP allows us to examine issues in greater detail.*).

The analysis showed that ACP helps interviewees in their work, particularly in conducting administrative procedures. By reviewing cases on ACP, they were able to quickly and collaboratively search for solutions and answers to specific questions (*A: ACP helps us in our work because we do not have to search for legislation and case law ourselves; B: I believe ACP enables me to find answers quickly, especially while conducting administrative procedures; D: On ACP we review cases and discuss them.*). They also relied on ACP in administrative procedures where they were uncertain about their decisions (*F: ACP users are very responsive, which helps us a lot with certain open questions and when we are not sure about a decision.*). Interviewees further highlighted that they used ACP when conducting administrative procedures to better understand what to focus on, particularly in difficult or complex cases or when they encountered dilemmas during decision-making (*B: We use ACP when dealing with more complex administrative procedures; C: We use ACP when we face dilemmas in conducting administrative procedures; ACP helps because we receive concrete answers to our questions*.).

Interviewees also relied on ACP when dealing with similar administrative procedures whose solutions they found on the platform (*F: ACP is useful when we deal with a similar question that has already been resolved or supplemented.*). For them, it was essential that cases on ACP were clearly explained on the basis of the GAPA and other legal regulations and that the solutions included references to professional literature and established case law (*E: What I like about ACP is the comparison of different authors' opinions and ways of reasoning, and that the cases do not only cite the provisions of GAPA and other laws but also include explanations based on professional literature and established case law.*). The use of ACP also made decision-making easier for interviewees, particularly in unusual administrative procedures (*A: Although I have a lot of knowledge about how an administrative procedure should be conducted in theory, it is more difficult in practice; B: In unusual administrative procedures, ACP showed us that different solutions are possible, which helped us make decisions more easily.*). Most interviewees expressed a high level of satisfaction with ACP (*C: We are satisfied with the support provided on ACP; E: ACP helps us think more broadly and express ourselves better; it is a credible source that provides high-quality answers and content; G: ACP does not only offer advice but provides professional, excellent, fast and, importantly, free assistance.*).

An important aspect of the use of ACP is its contribution to the lifelong learning of public officials. As the interviewees pointed out, ACP has influenced their ability to learn, explaining that they themselves learned a great deal by reviewing and reading cases on ACP (*F: I believe that public officials learn throughout their entire careers and often discover something new through practice.*).

They also encourage younger colleagues to learn, especially when they are preparing for the professional examination in administrative procedures (*D: We encourage them to use ACP when preparing for the professional examination in administrative procedures.*). According to the interviewees, once younger employees pass the professional examination, they tend to be better at legal reasoning than older employees. Some interviewees also praised younger colleagues, while others expressed concern about their lack of interest in learning legal terminology and their limited awareness of the importance of their work.

The analysis also showed that cooperation among interviewees and their colleagues was important when conducting administrative procedures. Not only did they discuss cases and exchange ideas, but this also helped them find solutions (*C: Through discussions with colleagues we look for ways forward and exchange arguments for and against until we reach a common solution; E: We often openly discuss the most difficult cases with colleagues and sometimes disagree; F: In our meetings, whether in person or online, we develop ideas and solutions for administrative procedures.*). Through such brainstorming, they were able to examine individual

administrative procedures more thoroughly while also obtaining additional information and exchanging experiences. Open communication therefore contributed to the development of legal competences among interviewees and their colleagues, particularly in relation to understanding administrative case law and becoming familiar with administrative case law on procedural rules, as well as in the preparation of regulations (*F: Open communication among colleagues contributes to better justification and higher-quality legal reasoning, to more consistent legal practice and to the preparation of regulations*; *G: I would like decision-making in administrative and judicial matters to be consistent for the same or similar facts, even across different cases*.).

According to the interviewees, supervisors in institutions should play an important role in encouraging public officials to use ACP and thereby strengthen their legal competences (*A: In my opinion, supervisors should encourage the use of ACP among employees, especially for developing legal terminology and legal reasoning; for example, our supervisor shares ACP cases with us; B: Supervisors must be committed and pay attention to the professional work of employees; E: As supervisors, it depends on us how we encourage employees to use ACP.*). However, some interviewees pointed out that their supervisors did not encourage the use of ACP to the extent they had expected (*B: There is no encouragement from supervisors for employees to use ACP.),* which resulted in some employees not being familiar with ACP (B: *In our organization the use of ACP is not widespread, many colleagues do not even know that it exists.).* For this reason, the interviewees suggested that every head of the authority should be formally introduced to ACP (*E: I propose that every supervisor of an institution should be familiar with ACP*). At the same time, supervisors should support officials in developing and upgrading their legal competences using ACP (*E: As the head of the authority, I am interested in how officials use ACP. If I notice that someone lacks certain competences, I point this out to them*.).

Interviewees explained that there are certain differences between them and their colleagues, which are reflected in their knowledge and experience. Public officials with a degree in law or public administration possess more prior legal knowledge than employees with degrees from other fields of study (*A: In public administration there are relatively few lawyers among those who conduct administrative procedures; B: We have hired people who did not study law or public administration; D: When employees have to draft a decision on dismissal, they use ACP, but those with legal education write it differently; those of us who have been conducting administrative procedures for a longer time also have more experience and therefore use ACP less; G: Colleagues often ask me why I spend one or two hours preparing an answer to a simple question, although I notice that courts often annul decisions made by top legal experts, while I myself am not a lawyer*.).

Differences among public officials are also visible across generations. Younger employees tend to use ACP more frequently (*D: Younger colleagues who do not have a public administration degree use ACP more often because it provides access to concrete questions and answers; E: I encourage younger employees to use ACP, so it has become natural for them; they like that they can quickly find a solution and that everything is available in one place.*), whereas older employees find it more difficult to adapt to its use (*E: Older employees adapt more slowly to using ACP.*).

Because of not using ACP, interviewees pointed out that some employees are not even aware of its existence. Interviewees unanimously agreed that public officials who decide on rights, obligations and legal interests in administrative procedures should acquire such knowledge already during their education, at least during their studies (*A: Administrative procedures should already be taught in secondary school; C: Public officials should acquire and develop legal competences during their studies, for example through a course in administrative procedural law.*). For this reason, some interviewees introduced ACP to newly employed colleagues at the beginning of their employment or during onboarding or mentoring (*D: We introduce ACP to new employees; E: I encourage new employees to look for solutions on ACP before asking colleagues*.). Interviewees also suggested improvements to ACP as an online platform, including the introduction of instructions for easier searching among the many cases (e.g., by legal article or keyword), the introduction of artificial intelligence tools, and establishing ACP as a mandatory professional resource with which all public officials conducting administrative procedures in the Slovenian public administration should be familiar and which they should regularly use.

The results of the qualitative analysis (Table 2) show that ACP represents important support in conducting administrative procedures and in developing the technical-legal, relational, and entrepreneurial competences of public officials. At the same time, ACP also represents a non-formal form of learning that significantly contributes to the lifelong professional learning of public officials in the Slovenian public administration and, through this, influences the development of their competences and their performance in the Slovenian public administration.

5 Discussion

Administrative procedures constitute one of the central processes of public administration in contemporary society, as they represent the locus of coordination between the public interest of the community and the rights of individuals. Accordingly, their lawful conduct—underpinned by the rights to good administration, including the right to be heard, to participate in the proceedings, to access the case file, to use one's own language, to receive a reasoned decision, to avail oneself of legal remedies, and to obtain impartial judicial protection—is essential for the effective resolution of conflicts arising within administrative relationships (Galetta & Ziller, 2024; Kovač, 2018). Administrative procedure also functions as a mechanism of dialogue between administrative authorities and individuals, which, when properly conducted, fosters public trust in administration and governmental authority. Legislation governing administrative procedures, including the Slovenian GAPA, therefore prescribes specific requirements for officials conducting such proceedings, notably an appropriate level and field of education, as well as the successful completion of a specialised state examination in administrative procedure (Kovač & Jerovšek, 2024).

However, competences acquired in this manner are not sufficient to implement all the objectives of administrative procedure. Accordingly, officials must continue to develop them throughout their careers. This applies already to technical legal knowledge and skills—particularly where public officials lack prior legal or administrative education—and even more so to entrepreneurial and relational competences, which must evolve over time in line with changing modes of more participative public governance, digitalised communication, and the newer generational profiles of participants in administrative proceedings (see Barnes, 2008; Stare & Pečarič, 2021; etc.).

Legal competences of public officials are becoming central to the conduct of administrative procedures, as they decide on the rights, obligations, and legal interests of the parties involved (Kovač et al., 2023; Mar et al., 2025). This means that public officials must be professionally qualified in the field of administrative law to perform such work and at the same time master various legal competences that can be developed using ACP. The results of the qualitative research with seven interviewees in a focus group (Table 2), which builds on a previously conducted quantitative study within a research project, provide an answer to the RQ of how the use of ACP affect the development of legal competences of public officials conducting administrative procedures in Slovenia and how it contributes to strengthening their lifelong learning and professional development.

ACP significantly influences the development of legal competences of public officials and their colleagues. This finding is consistent with the results of the previously conducted survey (Mar et al., 2025). Both studies showed that using ACP public officials strongly developed technical-legal competences, particularly legal argumentation, understanding of GAPA and the procedural specificities of sectoral regulations, and legal terminology. They also improved analytical thinking, the ability to establish the facts of a case, and the ability to apply a general rule to an individual case. According to the focus group participants, the use of ACP also enables them to better understand legal practice. These results are consistent with the views of other authors (Bedner et al., 2020; Finch & Fafinski, 2020; Isaacs et al., 2016; Kovač & Stare, 2014), who emphasized that law students, as future or already employed legal professionals and public officials, should acquire precisely these legal competences during their studies and further develop them through work, such as presenting a legal argument, the ability to understand and use the law, and the ability to apply knowledge in practice, among others. Using ACP, public officials also developed their entrepreneurial competences, and the interviewees particularly highlighted respect for fundamental ethical principles in conducting administrative procedures. This legal competence was also emphasized as important in the work of public officials by Gerkman and Cornett (2016), although they found that law students do not develop it sufficiently during their studies. In this regard, it can therefore be argued that public officials should use ACP, as it evidently contributes to improving this competence.

Using ACP, public officials also improved their relational legal competences, which enables them to communicate more respectfully and effectively with participants in the procedure and to better recognize legal interests, resulting in a more comprehensive and clearer establishment of the facts of the case. In this respect, it could be concluded that public officials correspond to the conceptual framework of The Whole Lawyer, in which relational competences such as communication, professional development, and working with others are particularly emphasized (Gerkman & Cornett, 2016), as well as to the concept of The T-shaped Lawyer (Carrel, 2021; Carrel, 2019), according to which, similarly to modern legal professionals, they are able to adapt to change, master different legal fields, are client-oriented, and possess highly developed social and relational competences.

An interesting, although somewhat expected, finding is that public officials differ not only in terms of previously acquired knowledge and experience but also in terms of age differences. Although younger or newly employed officials generally have less developed legal competences, unless they have prior education in law or public

administration, they are more skilled in using ACP than older employees, who usually possess more legal knowledge but adapt more slowly to the use of ACP. In this context, the role of leadership and colleagues appears to be crucial. While leadership determines whether employees will be encouraged to use ACP, properly introduced to it, and mentored in further developing their legal competences, colleagues play an important role in helping younger or newly employed employees, as well as older colleagues, by discussing issues with each other and seeking ideas and solutions also with the help of ACP. This support and positive attitude toward the use of ACP help employees find solutions more quickly and make decisions more easily in administrative procedures, including those that are more complex and challenging. As emphasized by the focus group participants, they are very satisfied with the use of ACP and perceive it as a high-quality and credible source, since the answers are not only briefly explained but also provide advisory explanations that include interpretations of various legal regulations, professional literature, and existing case law.

As emphasized by the focus group participants, an important competence is the ability to learn, and this is precisely the competence that public officials can further develop using ACP. Through ACP, public officials acquire knowledge by reading and examining solved cases (case studies). An important role of leadership is also to encourage public officials to use ACP when preparing for the professional examination in administrative procedure. Public officials can also use ACP to follow developments in their professional field, such as the latest amendment to the GAPA-I, in force since February 2026, which is building up the strive for more participative proceedings. In essence, ACP represents an activity through which public officials and its other users (e.g., parties, students) improve their knowledge, skills, and competences and thus contributes to their Lifelong Professional Learning (Isaacs et al., 2016; Hamilton, 2014; Mar et al., 2025). It can therefore be argued that in the Slovenian public administration, in addition to what is reported by Eurydice (2026), there exists another approach, or even a tool ACP that encourages public officials' Lifelong Professional Learning. For this reason, ACP must not become outdated but should follow broader social changes. As highlighted by participants in both studies (based on the survey and focus group), a virtual assistant named Atena was introduced on the ACP web platform in October 2026. A short video was also added with instructions on how to facilitate the search for cases on ACP and why ACP is important for the development of legal competences of public officials and their Lifelong Professional Learning.

This study has several important theoretical and practical implications. The central theoretical implication is the development of a questionnaire designed for qualitative research on the use of ACP and its influence on the development of legal competences of public officials. Most existing studies focus on the legal competences of law students or legal professionals, whereas this research provides a broader understanding of the role and work of public officials. The present research supports the results of the previously conducted survey on the legal competences of public officials and the importance of ACP in conducting administrative procedures, thereby also confirming the relevance of the self-developed conceptual framework of legal competences of public officials.

At the same time, the research contributes to a better understanding of Lifelong Professional Learning in public administration. ACP represents an important tool and a non-formal form of education that complements the formal education of law and public administration students, employed public officials, and other users (e.g., parties) and thus contributes to awareness of rights, obligations, and legal interests of everyone who may at some point be involved in administrative procedures.

The contribution is also significant in that it presents a multi-stage qualitative methodology. The focus group, conducted in autumn 2025 and analysed by early 2026, served as a mechanism for verifying and confirming the results previously obtained through a survey administered in spring 2025 among public officials as users of ACP. Given that qualitative methods in social science research are, by definition, less objectivised than quantitative approaches (Hendren et al., 2023), it is therefore essential to validate their findings through the triangulation of multiple methodological frameworks. Particularly in the case of both methods employed here—namely, the survey and the focus group—careful prior preparation is crucial to ensure the legitimacy of the results obtained. This entails, inter alia, the meticulous design of the questionnaire, the provision of a representative sample of respondents, the clear communication of the procedure to participants, and the appropriate moderation of the data collection process.

Although this study offers useful insights, certain limitations should also be acknowledged. The first limitation relates to the small sample of participants in the research, which are based on their self-assessment of the influence of ACP on the development of legal competences of public officials. Future research should therefore repeat both studies on a larger sample and include other users of ACP (e.g., students, parties). The second limitation is related to the specific context of the Slovenian public administration. Since different countries adopt different approaches to education, training, and Lifelong Professional Learning of public officials, the results cannot be directly

transferred to other countries. Future research could therefore provide broader insights into the impact of similar pedagogical and research projects such as ACP on the development of legal competences of public officials. Finally, the research considers only the perspective of public officials; therefore, future studies should also include organizational leadership and policymakers to improve understanding of how ACP and similar projects, such as online platforms, can be systematically integrated into the development of competences and lifelong professional learning of public officials.

6 Conclusion

Administrative procedure constitutes a key mechanism across all phases of public governance, particularly in Slovenia and the regions of Central Europe, where it represents one of the principal processes through which public administration exercises its competences. Consequently, administrative procedure must be understood in its full multifunctionality—not merely as a predominantly procedural safeguard of the fundamental rights of parties to proceedings, but also as an instrument enabling the overall improvement of administrative performance. Its effective management requires a range of combined competences, extending from legal expertise to entrepreneurial and relational skills. Although good administration is primarily a procedural concept of a legal nature, it must be interpreted beyond mere procedural legality. Indeed, maladministration may also comply with formal legality; however, unlike good administration, it remains formalistic and, as such, does not facilitate the development of partnerships with stakeholders—an objective likewise pursued within the framework of ACP. Owing to its multifunctional character, administrative procedure may thus be conceived as an instrument of collaborative governance, one that emphasises the creation of partnerships among stakeholders and thereby contributes to the legitimacy of administrative relationships.

In this context, the ACP project represents an important step forward, contributing not only to the active involvement of parties in administrative proceedings, but also to the development of competences among officials who interact with parties and determine their legal position. Throughout the entire period of ACP's operation—from 2009 until early 2026—it is evident that the primary users of the portal are public officials, accounting for approximately 70–80% of all users. Accordingly, the use of ACP makes a significant contribution to the development of these officials' competences, particularly with regard to the importance and correctness of the reasoning underpinning unilateral decisions, resolving life-situations of parties, the advancement of participatory communication practices, and similar. By employing a combination of survey and focus group methods, it has been methodologically soundly demonstrated that ACP directly contributes to the development of the competences in question. At the same time, these findings provide a basis for the further upgrading of ACP towards an even more participatory tool, both for its users and, more broadly, for all participants in administrative proceedings.

The paper also contributes to one of the most currently discussed topics in Human Resource Management – lifelong learning – particularly for officials employed in public administration who conduct administrative procedures. Slovenia can serve as a reference example for other CEE countries. While many countries have legal clinics on administrative law issues, none of the approaches known in the literature demonstrate such a systematic or measurable output as the Administrative Consultation Platform in Slovenia. Furthermore, the ACP is not only a framework for developing student competences, but predominantly legal and other competences of public officials exercising authoritative administrative tasks.

This study therefore provides guidance for policymakers and administrative bodies on how to design non-normative, but effective instruments supporting the principles and rules of general administrative procedure. For practitioners, the paper shows the tangible benefits of such projects in the systematic development of public officials' competences and offers guidance for creating similar initiatives on a national level or within a narrower administrative institutional context.

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Appendix: Questions for the Focus Group Discussion

1. Please explain how ACP is used in the authority where you are employed and how its use contributes to the development of legal competences for you and your colleagues.

2. Briefly explain why you believe that public officials should possess legal competences when performing their work or conducting administrative procedures, when these competences should be acquired (e.g., during university studies), and when and how they should be further developed (e.g., during work, using ACP).

3. Please explain how ACP is used in the authority where you are employed and how its use contributes to the development of legal competences for you and your colleagues.
3.a. Among the listed competences within each competence pillar, could you highlight at least one or two that you and your colleagues believe have been particularly developed over the past year due to the use of ACP, and provide an example of how this is reflected in the practice of conducting administrative procedures?

3.b. Among the listed competences within each competence pillar, could you highlight at least one or two that you and your colleagues believe were already sufficiently developed and have not been significantly improved over the past year using ACP, and provide an example of how this is reflected in the practice of conducting administrative procedures?

Technical-legal competences: To understand the GAPA and sector-specific procedures. To be familiar with administrative case law on procedural rules. To think analytically when solving administrative problems. To reason legally when solving procedural problems. To apply general legal rules to specific cases. To be aware that the processing of personal data is regulated by law. To be aware that digital content is protected by copyright law.
Entrepreneurial competences: To respect fundamental ethical principles (integrity, impartiality, confidentiality) when performing duties or conducting administrative procedures. To perform actions accurately when conducting administrative procedures. To proactively seek solutions while balancing the public interest and the rights of the parties.
Relational competences: To communicate effectively with participants in the administrative procedure. To communicate respectfully with parties. To focus on parties. To identify the legal interests of the parties in individual cases. Ability to learn.

4. On average, how often per month do you use ACP in your work, and what is the attitude towards its use in the authority where you are employed? Do you consider it useful, and why (e.g., because it enables you or your colleagues to perform tasks more quickly or correctly, because it has improved your ability to perform tasks, because it is easy and understandable to use, because its use is expected by supervisors or colleagues, or because you use it on your own initiative as you know how to use it substantively, e.g., searching for and reading cases)?

5. Would you suggest any improvements to ACP that could help public officials further develop or upgrade their legal competences?