



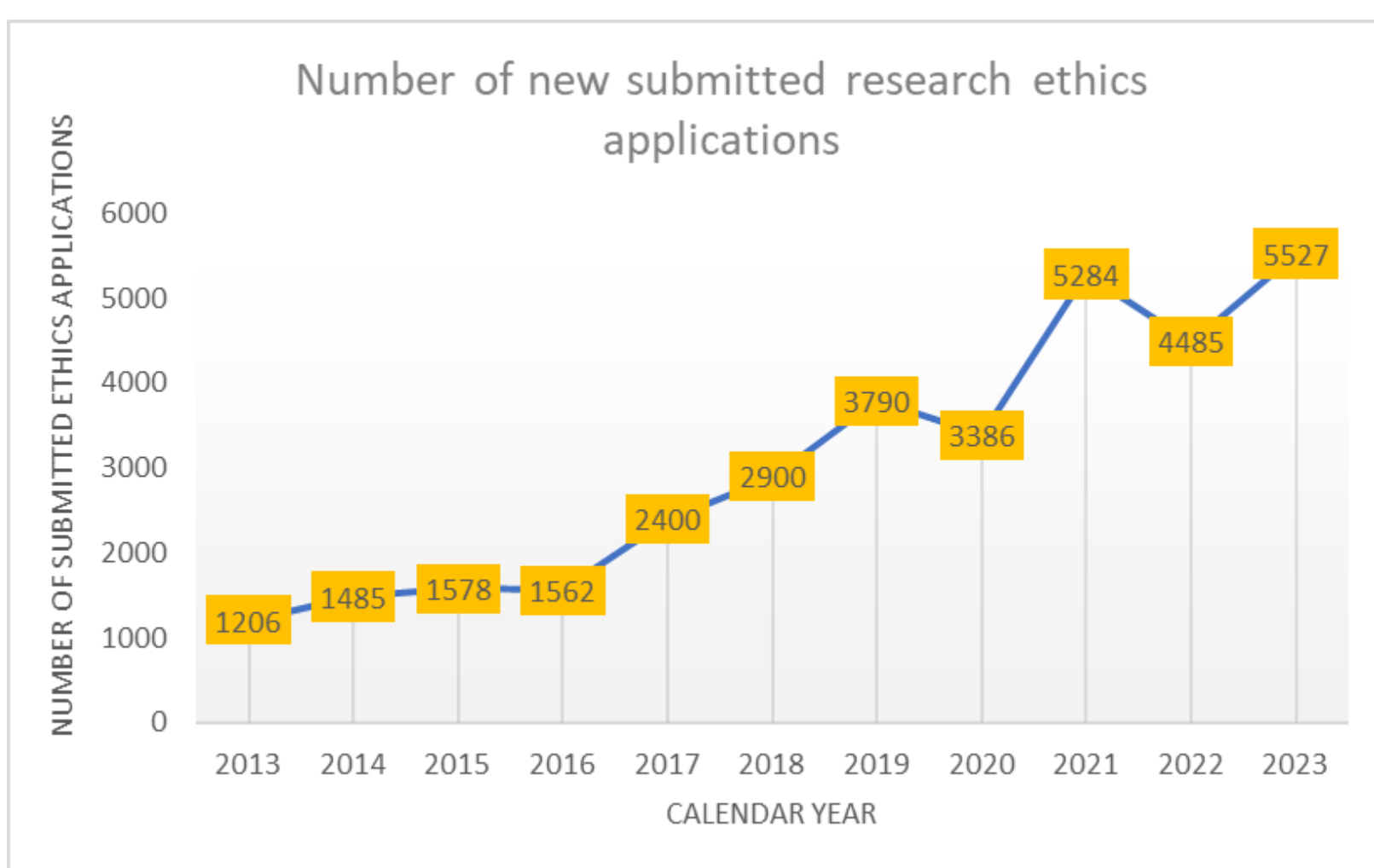
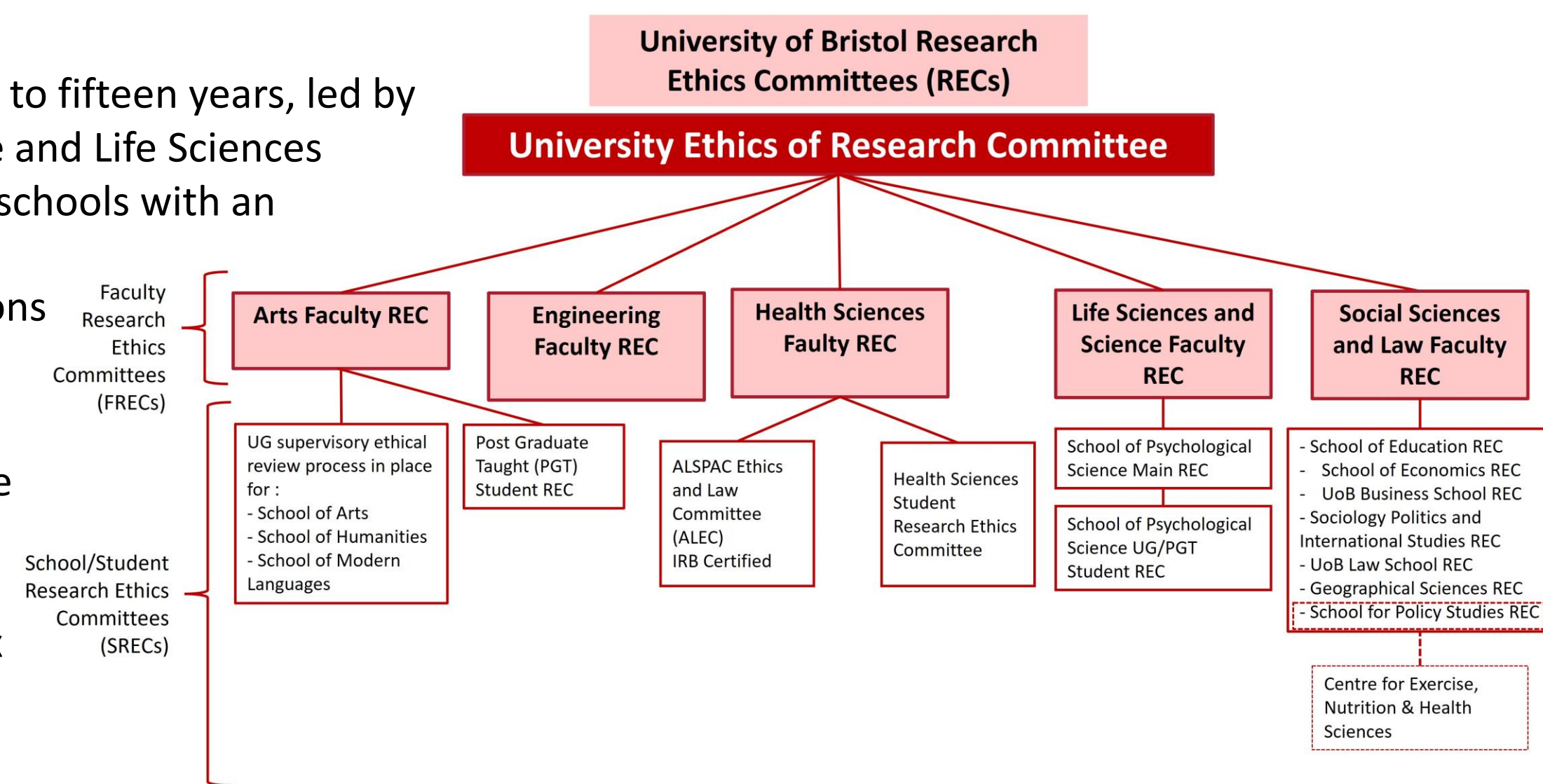
A Sector in Flux – Reimagining Research Ethics and Integrity Frameworks

The Inciting Issue:

Our existing Research Ethics Committee structure has developed over the past ten to fifteen years, led by immediate needs and based around the structure of the six Faculties (with Science and Life Sciences combined). There are five Faculty RECs – most of which have sub-committees; for schools with an unusually high number of applications, to manage a high number of student applications (undergraduate and/or postgraduate-taught), or to manage applications relating to specific areas or projects.

This gives us a total of 20 committees, all of which have been brought within a unifying process under the University Ethics of Research Committee – but still have their own divergent processes, structures, schedules and degrees of support.

In 2023, the University's executive group announced a plan to restructure the six Faculties into three (Arts, Social Sciences & Law – Science & Engineering – Health Science & Life Sciences).



The Opportunity

As you can see in this chart, the past twelve years has seen an enormous increase in the number of REC reviews tracked within our systems. Some of this is because of better tracking of reviews that were already happening, but it is largely due to increased student numbers and academic activity in areas involving human participant research, and an increase in compliance with ethical requirements.

With the University's plan to revise the faculty structure there was a risk that the existing multi-siloed faculty and school research ethics committee model would no longer be feasible. The potential for three large 'super' research ethics committees could potentially cause higher workloads and greater delays for applicants.

We chose to see this instead as an opportunity for a **ground up systematic restructure of our systems**, in order to address current strains on the system and imbalances of workload allocation, and to strive for greater adherence with **UKRIO's Core Principles** for research ethics reviews.

The Solution

The previous structure will be replaced with 4 principle workstreams. Within each; RECs will be constituted of **staff from across the faculties**, the number and nature of RECs will be **determined by demand**, and meetings will be **scheduled based on observed peaks and troughs** in applications.

Independence

RECs will no longer be comprised solely of members of the applicant's own Faculty.

Competence

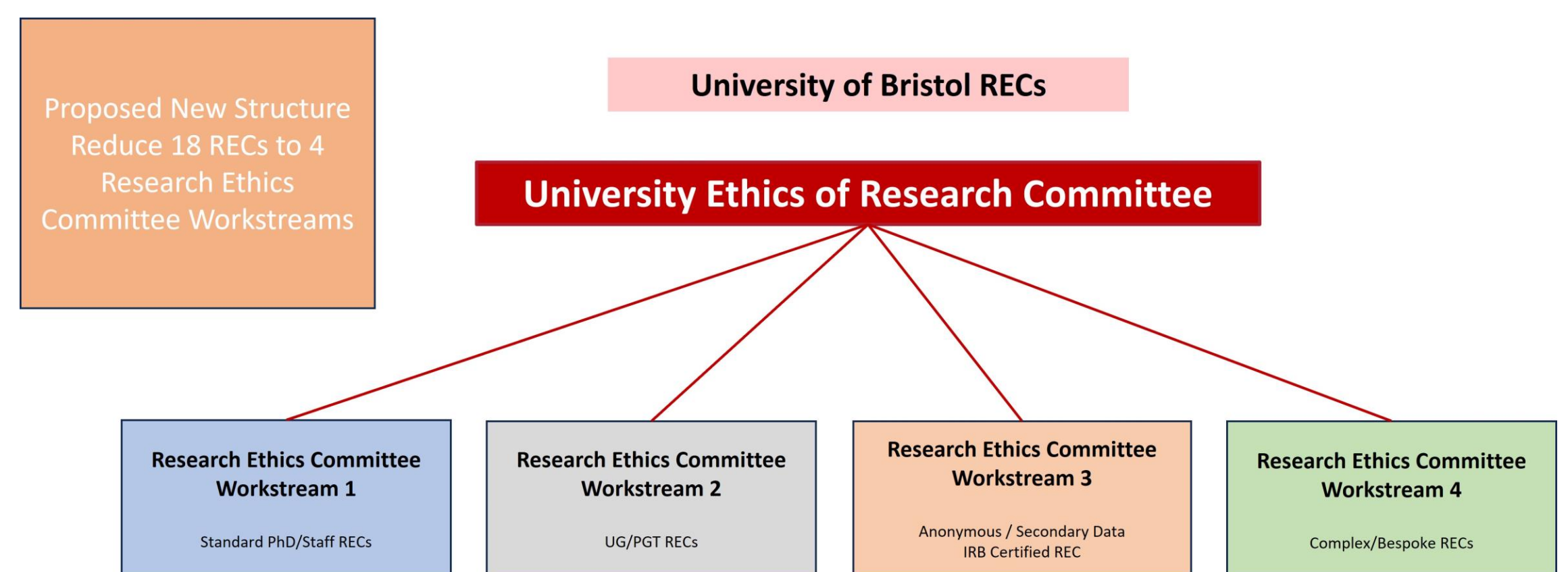
REC members will gain experience of a wider range of research areas and types, benefiting from the knowledge and expertise of colleagues from across the organisation.

Facilitation

Applicants will no longer need to wait for a specific committee's next meeting, their project will simply be assigned to the next committee with capacity.

Transparency & Accountability

We will retain and build upon our unified online application process and an oversight structure managed by the Ethics of Research Committee.



The proposed REC restructure will include committee membership from a broad membership from across the university.

Challenges and Lessons Learnt

The main challenge we faced was decoupling an existing framework that was firmly embedded within institutional culture. We also began to fully understand how some of the developments implemented over the years had introduced increased bureaucracy and complexity into the research ethics review process. The creation of new committees, expanded committee member numbers, and increased meetings meant that the structure had grown considerably, without commensurate growth of support.

The development of training materials, guidance documents and support for researchers diminished over time, due to a lack of capacity.

With the research landscape changing at pace, the proposal to revise our ethics and integrity frameworks has resulted in a risk of significant 'ethics creep'. Whereby other institutional remits attempt to expand the role and remit of research ethics committees to address their own areas of concern – this risks undermining the integrity of the project, as attempts to address often intractable problems by the wrong means could derail progress.

Conclusion

By implementing this process, we hope to reduce the risk of non-compliance with Research Ethics and Integrity requirements, increase engagement, provide streamlined and equitable review processes, auditable evidence of consistent decision making, reduced risk of delays, and improved relationships.

