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**PRICING OF RESEARCH:
WHAT WILL THE MARKET BEAR?**

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Introduction

The economic analysis of research has proved to be a rich field for Australian analysts. The focus of the work has largely been on the magnitude of the benefits and their measurement (see for example Lindner and Jarrett, Rose, Marsden et al) and more recently on the distribution of the benefits (see for example Edwards and Freebairn 1982, 1984, Freebairn et al, Mullen et al, Alston et al, and the reviews by Norton and Davis, and Alston). Agricultural economists have played a leading role in this work.

Whilst the issue of the pricing of research has not been a mainstream topic, it has received attention in the context of research funding, cost allocation and who should pay - examples include Johnston, IAC, ASTEC, Lloyd et al. The topic of public enterprise pricing has a much more extensive literature - see for example Trebing; and Xavier, and is relevant to the issue of research pricing, given the prevalence of publicly funded research agencies in Australia.

Recent efforts to increase the influence of the market on the direction and funding of public research (BIE; ASTEC; Task Force on the Commercialisation of Research) have had the effect of focusing greater attention on the issue of research pricing by government agencies.

The purpose of this paper is to review a number of theoretical pricing issues against this background, consider how these and other practical concerns can be addressed from an operational and policy viewpoint and finally explore what pricing strategies might be implemented by a publicly funded research agency. The perspective taken is that of a public enterprise such as CSIRO which performs a mix of publicly funded research and contract research funded from both public and private sources.

Background

Over the past decade the environment for publicly funded scientific research has undergone marked change. Reductions in government spending through the 1980's and the achievement of budget surpluses were accompanied by steadily declining research budgets funded directly from Commonwealth appropriation (Figure 1).

Associated with tightening budgets were pressures for greater accountability and improved research management. Particular emphasis was placed on demonstrating value for money and closer links with industry. Carrots included increased competitive funding (Figure 2) and greater funding for mission oriented research eg land and water care; climate change, and an array of tax concessions for investment in R&D. The 'stick' of substantial reductions in direct appropriation funding appeared to be the most influential factor, at least in the case of CSIRO, judging by the rapid increase in external funding which began in 1983-84, one year after the first reduction in appropriation funding. The subsequent supplementary stick of an external funding target set in 1988 merely served to reinforce a trend which was already well established. It should be said by way of qualification that the external funding target was viewed as binding by the organisation and did act as a mechanism to ensure the continuation of that trend - see Figure 3.

More recently there appears to have been a more sympathetic attitude to S&T with the growing realisation that the 'clever country' paradigm will require R&D inputs to achieve its goals and that the elimination of the budget deficit is not sufficient to address the trade deficit problem. The engagement in political activity by research scientists also contributed to the change in attitude. The result has been a reversal in the steady decline in appropriation funds, although capital funding is still well below the levels of the early 1980's (Figure 4).

A goal of improved competitiveness based at least in part on S&T and an R&D effort which is more accountable to funders imply a research culture which is more market driven and for which the allocation of limited resources among competing opportunities is a major issue. It is noteworthy that systematic priority setting and research evaluation have become significant activities in guiding the allocation of resources in CSIRO (CSIRO Corporate Planning Office; Stocker; Stocker and McRae; Young et al.)

The shift in emphasis to competitive funding has also given greater prominence to the role of the major funding bodies eg NH&MRC, ARC and the RIRC's and their funding policies. Traditionally, these agencies follow a policy of 'marginal funding' ie project funding covers less than the full cost of performing the research and typically only variable costs are funded. This policy is perceived as levering greater benefits for less cost for the funding agency's constituents.

Against this background a number of important issues have been identified (Lloyd et al; ASTEC):

- infrastructure rundown
- cross-subsidisation
- the appropriate balance between basic/ strategic and applied research
- the nature of the research market

Related to each of these issues is the issue of the pricing of research. If for example, there was full cost recovery, then the price received would include provision for infrastructure renewal. In addition cross-subsidisation could be eliminated and it seems likely that competition in the research market would be enhanced. Concerns about the balance between short and longer term research would be less acute, because funding targets would be more easily achieved and hence there would be less pressure to earn revenue by reallocating resources from strategic to applied research.

The appealingly simple solution of full cost recovery however looks at only one side of the equation, and ignores many of the factors which make the market for research a complex one. Research activity operates in non-linear fashion along a continuum from basic to applied and the public good and market failure characteristics of the research may vary significantly along that continuum. In addition, a number of research funding agencies have begun to set their own priorities and others seem set to follow suit. If these priorities coincide with those of the research performer, what implications does this have for research pricing? Whilst the research market in Australia is characterised by competition between Commonwealth agencies such as CSIRO, State Departments and universities, the intensity of competition is not uniform and areas of specialisation may be able to exert price leverage.

Theoretical Aspects

The theory of the firm and its extensions into public enterprise pricing (see for example Varian) represent an obvious starting point for seeking guidance on research pricing. The work on transfer pricing (see for example Grace and Berg) also has relevance, but its concern with intra firm pricing is less relevant to the perspective of this paper.

The problems encountered in public enterprise pricing have been analysed in an extensive literature and include marginal cost pricing and its implementation, cross-subsidisation between market segments, short versus long run costs and peak demand pricing (see for example Trebing; Xavier; and Ng and the references quoted therein).

Theory points to marginal cost pricing as a necessary condition for achieving efficiency¹. The statement by McKie that "the principle that efficient resource allocation requires prices equal at all times to short-run marginal cost (including externalities) is theoretically unassailable" (p. 524) is qualified by † on two counts - that "price must include all the costs that production of an additional unit imposes, regardless of when these costs are actually realised" and that the marginal costs are static "without calendar dates".

A dilemma identified by Ng is that whilst failure to adopt short-run marginal cost (SRMC) will result in allocative inefficiency, if SRMC is less than average cost (AC), losses will be incurred, and if SRMC is less than long-run marginal cost (LRMC), excess consumption will occur in the long run.

To address these issues, Xavier (pp. 259-60) offers a set of pricing principles:

- price should not fall below MC, and preferably should equal MC.
- in a situation of excess demand eg peak demand, price should be set above MC to promote rationing; conversely in a situation of excess capacity, price should be lowered "to reflect the lower real opportunity cost of supply and to stimulate demand."
- if price does not generate the desired revenue, the inverse elasticity pricing or Ramsay rule (see Varian, pp. 276-78) can be applied to market segments of differing price sensitivity.

In presenting these principles, Xavier points to their consistency with the view of Baumol that "while incremental cost should not *determine* prices or rates, they set the lower boundary and demand conditions and regulation the upper boundary, within which pricing decisions should be made."

These principles are rather fuzzy when it comes to practical application, and not surprisingly a number of problems arise - see Ng; Xavier

Theoretical problems relate to choice of SRMC or LRMC, and the relevance of the theory of second best. Xavier suggests that the debate on the relevance of SRMC versus LRMC

¹ The policy of marginal funding by competitive grant agencies should not be confused with marginal cost pricing. In so far as funding agencies are unfamiliar with the cost structures of research performers, the two will coincide only by chance.

has been unnecessary because the pricing *effects* represent the objective rather than the application of MC pricing. The implication is that any deviation from SRMC to meet say a revenue objective such as cost recovery, or a capacity rationing objective should follow the above guideline principles to minimise any efficiency distortion.

The theoretical prescription for marginal cost pricing is based on the assumption of a first best world with no distortions. Recognition that the real world is characterised by numerous distortions which do not allow Pareto-optimal conditions to be met throughout the economy underlies the pricing rules prescribed by the theory of second best. However second best rules are complicated, informationally and administratively demanding, and must be followed by all sectors characterised by distortions (Ng p. 28). To overcome this "unhappy situation", Ng proposes use of the theory of third best which "suggests that efficient pricing policy for a public enterprise supplying a good with no important close complements or substitutes is to price somewhat above marginal cost, that is, to adopt a price/MC ratio equal to the average ratio of the economy" (p.29). For competitive goods, assessment needs to be made of the price/MC ratio for the competing/complementary industries. For perfectly competitive industries, the third best rule becomes equivalent to the first best rule.

A second problem area is that of measurement and application. Because it is future costs rather than historical costs which are relevant (McKie; Parmenter and Webb), limited information and uncertainty will prevent access to precise information, and resulting ambiguity implies that virtually any pricing policy can be selected. Nevertheless, Xavier (p.262-3) points out that in practice, it should be possible to obtain the required information from investment and planning modelling exercises, or failing that "it should be practicable to obtain a broad indication of the direction in which prices at the margin should be moving..... A main priority is to remove any wide divergence between the cost to the system of increasing supply capacity and the charges currently paid by consumers for marginal supplies."

A particular measurement issue relates to the estimation of capital cost allowances for use in computing measures of MC. The typical enterprise is concerned with pricing goods produced by a system involving capital plant and equipment of different vintages rather than one built from scratch and the "crucial problem is how to calculate the unit amortization charge in the determination of marginal cost" (Parmenter and Webb p. 15). To overcome the severe data requirements for estimates which take account of the interdependence between costs, prices and output forecasts, Parmenter and Webb build on discounted cash flow investment procedures to derive rules of thumb which are less demanding of data and computation. These they suggest will provide a useful framework for checking the appropriate relationship between costs and prices.

In the context of research pricing, the foregoing discussion points to the relevance of MC pricing for publicly funded research agencies, and indicates that the major operational problems could be overcome. Perhaps a more important issue is the level of price which should be set. On the research performance or supply side, the goals of the research agency will be an important factor.

If for example as a result of marginal funding by funding agencies together with the need to achieve a predetermined target for funds from external sources, a loss is made on the contract research undertaken, should the government be prepared to cover the loss with a

subsidy? In so far as such a subsidy might move prices closer to MC and thus improve efficiency of utilisation, Vickrey concludes that the theoretical case may be strong, "but experience counsels caution" (p. 549). A detrimental impact on managerial and technical efficiency may result, and "too often a mendicant mentality seems to develop". Xavier also makes the point that a policy of losses adversely affects management motivation. The inefficiency which results may exceed any gain from pricing.

This latter point is emphasised by Ng, who points out that "conservative estimates put the extra costs of a dollar of government revenue at about 50 cents to 1 dollar [which] can hardly be justified by the usually moderate gain of MC-pricing" (p. 29). He concludes that "where MC-pricing leads to deficits, AC-pricing is a more appropriate policy in view of the substantial extra costs of government subsidies." Overall, Ng reaches the conclusion that "the consideration of both second best and costs of government revenue suggests that public enterprises should price their products above marginal costs" (p.31).

To the extent that marginal funding by research funders approximates MC pricing by research performers, then Ng's conclusion has direct relevance. In so far as marginal funding results in $P < MC$, his proposal carries even more weight. Again for departures from MC pricing, application of the Ramsay rule to minimise distortions seems appropriate (Xavier p. 265).

The findings reported above however ignore the demand side of the equation. Efficiency considerations also suggest that the cost of research should be borne by those who receive the benefits, with the price level or share of the cost being determined by the share of the benefits received (ABARE; Johnston; Lloyd et al). Accordingly there may be a case for a subsidy if the share of benefits going to consumers or the community is significant. Such a case should however be restricted to publicly funded research (Lloyd et al), otherwise subsidies would take on an "immense role" (IAC).

In discussing the issue of marginal funding in the context of rural research, Lloyd et al take a more aggressive stand in addressing the demand side by concluding that there is a significant underinvestment problem, which is a combination of market failure and "government failure" (core funding is politically unprofitable because of immediate cost and distant and diffuse benefits), and proposing that there is "an especially strong case for increased grower funding of research, including research overheads." This proposal is supported by the fact that in the long run, all overhead costs become variable costs, and evidence that growers contribute less than 10% of the costs of rural research but according to the IAC, they receive for most products 60-90% of the gains.

The call by Lloyd et al for RIRC's to contribute to overhead costs is designed to address the infrastructure rundown problem, as well as the basic-strategic-applied balance problem.

In considering research pricing by CSIRO, ABARE espouse the principle of full cost recovery, including overheads, if benefits accrue to the private sector. This policy should be departed from only when benefits go mostly to consumers or there is a community service obligation. Accordingly, pricing policy will be a continuum ranging from full cost recovery to full public funding. The research management goal should be to maximise the pay-off to society subject to budget and science capacity. Together with the external funding target, this poses a challenging constrained maximisation problem for CSIRO.

The issue of whether a profit should be earned in addition to cost recovery is taken up by Xavier in relation to accumulating capital for investment. This factor underlies the specification of rates of return for public enterprises for example in Victoria. A related issue is that of seeking a return on intellectual property which forms an input to project research. In each case, much will depend on what the market will bear, and the comment made by Baumol again seems pertinent viz. incremental cost should set the lower boundary, and demand conditions the upper boundary.

Both Xavier and ABARE take the view that to achieve efficiency, research pricing needs to be complemented by other activities. Xavier acknowledges that MC pricing is a static concept, and that what is relevant is dynamic efficiency. In a real world situation, entrepreneurship and innovation may be more important than static Pareto efficiency and he points to performance evaluation and the minimisation of entry and exit barriers to ensure contestable markets. Patenting, commercial support services and marketing are identified by ABARE as required complementary activities to the adopted charging policy.

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, it may be broadly concluded that in a prescriptive sense the contribution which economic theory has made to date has been useful but limited. Clearly there is scope for further work in the area of research pricing. In the meantime, the issues identified earlier are being addressed by research funders and performers and the following sections consider them from a Commonwealth perspective and then from a CSIRO viewpoint.

A Commonwealth View

In recent years, the government has encouraged aligning research in public sector agencies with national and, in particular for CSIRO, industry goals and needs. In fact to encourage a closer relationship with industry, the Commonwealth Government imposed a 30% external funding target on CSIRO. This closer alignment with industry has resulted in increased funding from sources other than direct government appropriation.

The growth in external earnings in CSIRO is clearly demonstrated in Figure 5. This increase in external earnings has brought with it an increased emphasis on commercial concerns; especially practices of costing and pricing of research.

This issue was recently addressed by a Working Party of the Coordination Committee on Science and Technology and its findings are drawn upon in this section of the paper.

It is essential that it be recognised that "costing" and "pricing" of research are different issues.

Costing of Research

Accurate costings emanating from appropriate accrual accounting systems are essential to the information base on which decision-makers rely for improved resource allocation decisions. The reference to "accrual" is also an important issue, as it is essential that the

full costs of any research project are able to be identified. These full costs include not only the traditional direct project costs of:

- Salaries of staff engaged on the project;
- Salary on-costs e.g. employer's superannuation contributions; and
- Operating costs e.g. travel consumables, equipment.

But they must also include indirect and infrastructure costs such as:

- Accrued recreation and long service leave;
- Overheads e.g. Divisional and Corporate management, library, workshop, utility costs;
- Assets depreciation or lease charge (including buildings).

By this approach, the full costs of a project can be identified and informed decisions made regarding priority setting, resource allocation and pricing.

Pricing of Research

Pricing decisions are based on the "market" for the research service and depend upon many factors, a significant one of which is costs. Charging for services is a fundamental means of communication in a market-based economy between those seeking services and those providing them.

However negotiating a specific price for a project can be a complex exercise requiring the assessment of the value of the research outcomes to:

- the client e.g. the funder; (individual company, R&D Corporation, government department);
- the constituents of the funder e.g. rural industries; the community or some subset of the community;
- the nation;
- the performer e.g. CSIRO.

The estimated value of a research project to the respective interested parties must exceed the corresponding costs of carrying it out, otherwise the project should not proceed. Some factors, by no means exhaustive, which should be considered in determining "value" are:

- Consistency of the research with the overall objectives of research performer and funder;
- Ownership of results of the research, including intellectual property;
- Degree to which the client or funder's constituents may appropriate the benefits of the research;
- National or public benefit from the research.
- Value to the research performer e.g. ability to establish a market reputation, or training of staff in new areas.

Less Than Full Cost Pricing

Assessing the relevant factors and determining to whom the research is of value (performer, funder, funder's constituency and/or the nation) may mean that it is entirely appropriate to charge the funder less than full costs.

Underpricing could be a problem however if it were based on ignorance of the full costs of the research or it is done to achieve short term benefits while adversely impacting in the longer term.

There has been considerable debate about funders meeting the infrastructure costs of public sector research agencies (see ASTEC; Lloyd et al). It should be recognised that while external funding targets are an indication from the Government that research agencies should perform a proportion of their overall research for external users, they do not imply that the research should be performed at below full cost and be subsidised from appropriation funds.

It needs to be recognised that appropriation funds are provided to public sector research agencies to maintain a strategic research base for current and future benefits to the nation.

We emphasise that within CSIRO, priorities for this strategic research are set taking into account industry and national needs as well as expected economic benefits to the nation.

CSIRO's Approach - Lessons for Future Pricing Policy

In 1990-91 CSIRO received around \$400M in appropriation funds from the Commonwealth to carry out strategic and applied research in support of national economic, social and environmental objectives. The Organisation also received a further \$160M of non-appropriation funds from a variety of sources including Rural Industry R&D Corporations, private sector companies, government departments and grant agencies as well as revenue from royalties and the sale of goods and services (Figure 5). These funds were provided to support a range of strategic and applied research projects in areas of interest or potential benefit to the funders.

In a significant number of projects undertaken by CSIRO for external clients, the external funds do not cover the costs of the research. There are a number of reasons for this. Many externally funded projects are collaborative ventures, where risks and rewards are shared between the Organisation and funder. In other cases, agencies have been unwilling to fund more than the direct costs of research, arguing that it is not their responsibility to support CSIRO's infrastructure.

The result has been that although around 30% of CSIRO's total budget comes from external funds (Figure 3), a considerably higher fraction of the Organisation's resources than this is committed to work being carried out under external contracts. Although this may not be inappropriate *per se*, it is clear that the Organisation runs the risk of losing flexibility to re-direct resources, as a result for example of changing national priorities, if its resources are by and large committed to externally funded activities.

The Government has set CSIRO the target of achieving 30% of its total budget from external funds as an indicator of its ability to interact with industry. At the same time, the Organisation is committed to maintaining a strong effort in strategic research. Divisions

of CSIRO can only maintain viable long term strategic research activities and high levels of external funds if their externally funded research projects are properly costed and priced. It is important therefore to establish principles that guide the Organisation's approach to pricing its research.

All of CSIRO's research is ultimately for the national interest. However, there are many external agencies - companies, industries and community groups, which can appropriate substantial benefits from particular programs and projects and under these circumstances, it seems reasonable that these beneficiaries should be prepared to bear the full costs of the work. In other projects, the value of appropriable benefits to clients may be less than the cost of the research, but CSIRO might still wish to undertake the research because of its broader national benefit, recovering some of the costs from a client.

There will also be projects for which the broad overall benefits to the nation are high but there is no clearly identified beneficiary. In such cases, CSIRO might fund the project entirely from appropriation funding, subject to the evaluation of the priority of the project in relation to other research activities.

Underlying these principles is the issue of project costing. Many funders have typically considered only the direct costs of the project whereas these are in fact only a fraction of the real cost. Costs such as overheads and infrastructure costs are incurred by CSIRO and other research performers and must also be covered. These costs should be attributed to specific research projects. If these costs are not recovered from clients, the work can only be undertaken if a decision is taken by CSIRO to direct funds from other activities to subsidise the project. The move from traditional public sector cash accounting to accrual accounting for management purposes will facilitate this process of cost attribution.

In summary, CSIRO is implementing systems to ensure full and accurate costing of research projects. The price of research is always a matter for negotiation between the funder and the research provider, but it seems reasonable for the research provider to take the value of the research outcomes as well as the cost of performing the research into account when negotiating the price.

Conclusion

Research pricing is becoming a more important issue with the growing emphasis on competitive funding, and pressures for greater accountability and improved financial management in the public sector.

The preference in public enterprise pricing from a theoretical efficiency perspective is to set price equal to marginal cost. If this strategy does not meet revenue objectives, then there is scope for departing from MC pricing, either by applying the Ramsay rule, or following Ng's suggestion, set price equal to average cost if MC pricing leads to deficits. This latter proposal is based on recognition of the high cost of collecting extra taxes. Considerable flexibility appears to be available to price setting agents.

In the case of publicly funded research, the market in Australia is competitive, and the research performer must pay heed to the demand side of the equation in setting prices for research. Again there appears to be scope for flexibility.

Although the research performer's preference will usually be to follow a policy of full cost recovery, such a policy will almost inevitably be in conflict with the marginal funding policy followed by virtually all competitive funding agencies.

To the extent that the Government wishes to reconcile the goals of closer industry collaboration via external funding targets imposed on publicly funded research performers, a greater degree of competitive funding and at the same time avoid subsidisation of research funded by grant agencies, there would appear to be two complementary strategies.

One is to seek a change in the funding policies of the competitive funding bodies. Lloyd et al point out that marginal funding is not in the longer term interest of the funding agencies.

A second strategy is for the government to encourage joint setting of research priorities by the funders and the performers of research. In a situation where the research performer already plans to do all or part of the research which a funding agency is willing to marginally fund, then less than full cost recovery may not involve a serious distortion in the allocation of resources. It is not however clear that funding bodies which are keen to set their own priorities in line with the wishes of their constituents are prepared for such a development.

Certainly, agencies such as CSIRO are giving careful consideration to the pricing principles to be adopted for contract research. Greater emphasis is likely to be placed on full cost recovery.

Such a move is likely to place greater pressure on the current pricing rigidities in the market for research. If this leads to a greater degree of flexibility in price setting then there may be advantages for all players.

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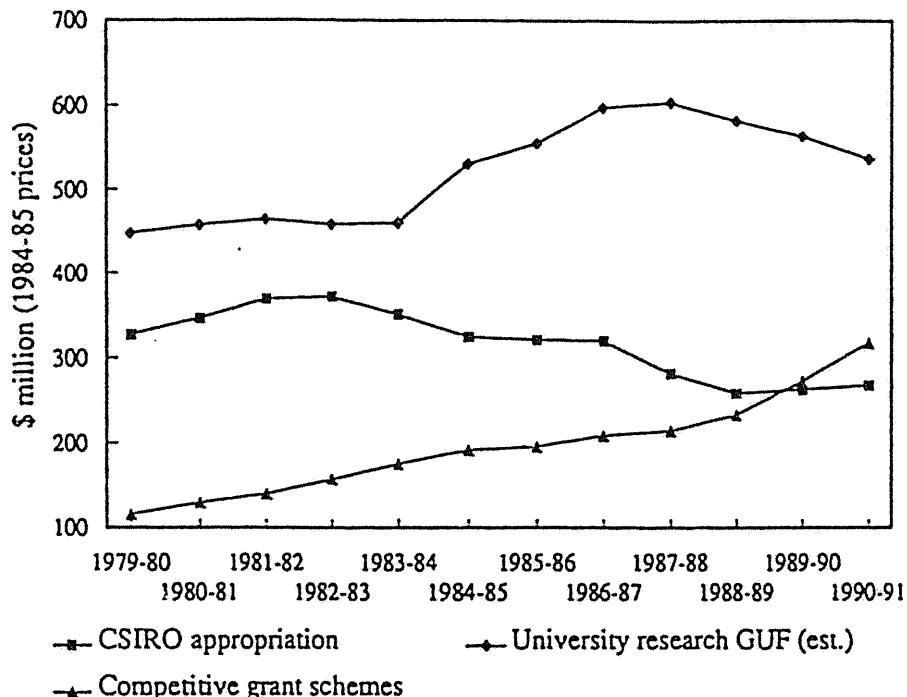
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Figure 1.1 Trends in Commonwealth R&D funding, 1979-80 to 1990-91



Source: Science and technology budget statement, 1990-91, *Tables 1, 3 and 4*.

Figure 2.. Growth in expenditure by Commonwealth agencies offering competitive research grants, 1979-80 to 1990-91

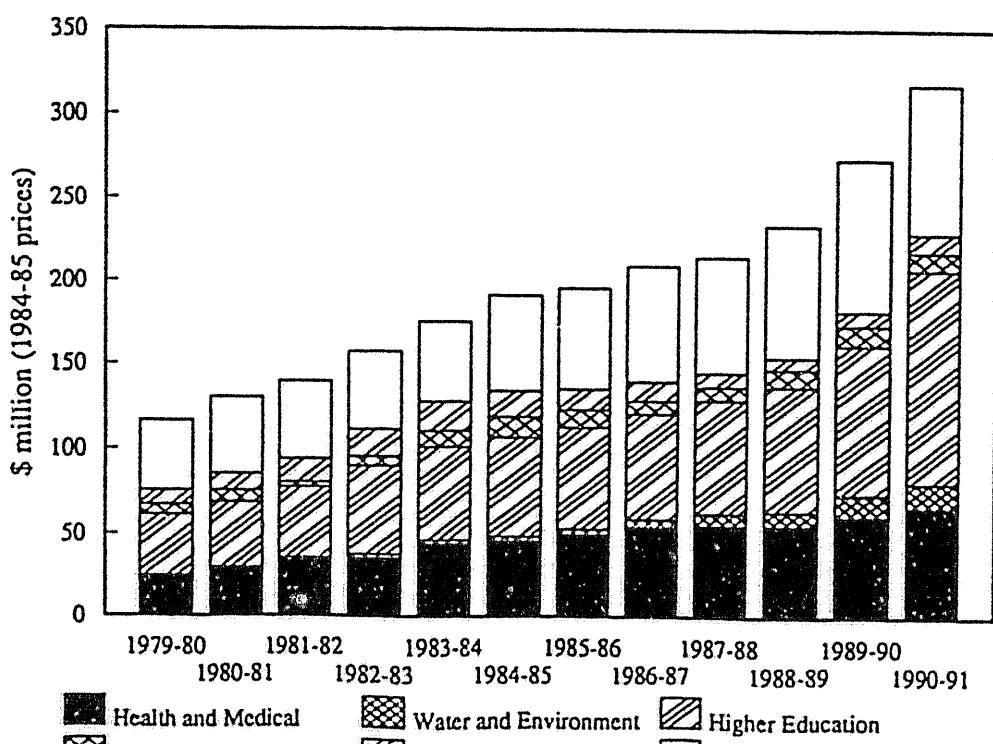
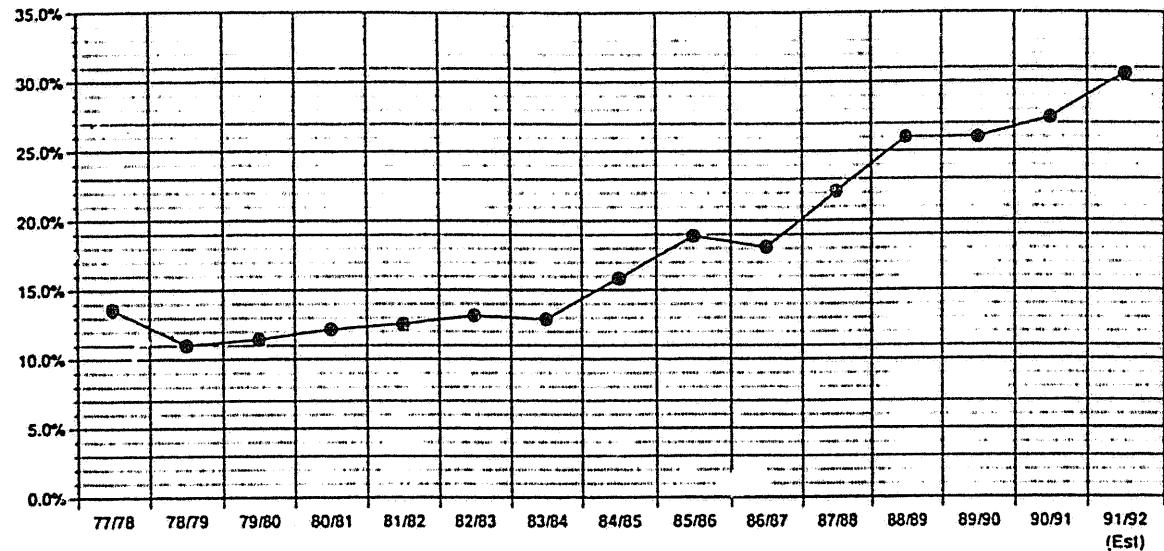


Figure 3.

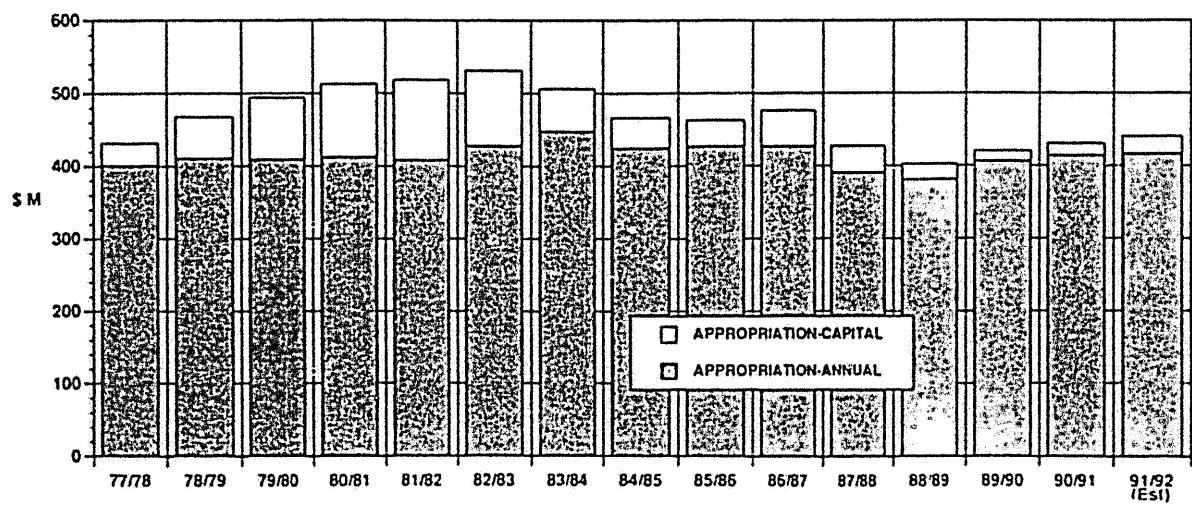
CSIRO CASH EXPENDITURE 1977-78 TO 1991-92 (Est)
EXTERNAL FUNDS as a percent of TOTAL FUNDS



Source: CSIRO Research Data Office

Figure 4.

CSIRO CASH EXPENDITURE 1977-78 TO 1991-92 (Est)
APPROPRIATION FUNDS
(Adjusted to \$1991-92)



Source: CSIRO Research Data Office

Figure 5.

