

# **Modelling of Growth and Development for Optimising Beef Cattle Production Systems**

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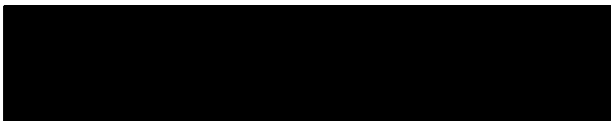
*A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New  
England.*

**June 2007**

## Declaration

*I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.*

*I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.*

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the author.

Signature

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors. Brian Kinghorn's guidance, knowledge and ability to think 'outside the square' have been invaluable. Julius van der Werf more than capably filled the void created when Brian was absent on sabbatical. He has shown a great understanding of my research and his attention to detail has continually challenged me to justify how and why I have conducted this research. I would also like to thank John Thompson for his assistance in developing an understanding of the growth models I have worked with.

I would like to thank the Beef CRC for Beef Quality for their financial support. I would also like to thank Sygen International for providing the financial funds that allowed me to undertake a study sabbatical as part of my PhD. I would like to thank the staff at PIC in Franklin, Kentucky, USA for welcoming me during this sabbatical. Thanks must be extended to Andrea Doeschl-Wilson and Ilias Kyriazakis for facilitating my stay at the Scottish Agricultural College, Bush Estate, Penicuik, Scotland. I must also thank Gerry Emmans for the discussions while I was at SAC. I would also like to thank all the staff and students of SAC for their hospitality, especially Francis who helped facilitate the social aspects of my stay.

Special thanks must go to Alex Woolaston for his friendship and assistance with statistical issues. Darryl Savage, Nathan Purvis and Andrew Slack-Smith are thanked for their assistance in obtaining information used in chapter 6. My office mates, Gareth, Zhigang (Johnny), Fiona, Lindsay, Aaron and Boyd must be thanked for our, at times bizarre, discussions and their tolerance of me during periods of high stress. I'd also like to thank my numerous house mates, Rural Science staff, Post Grads and friends from town for their support, particularly my touch football and soccer teams.

I must also thank my cell mate of the last five years, Cedric. My sentence is finally over. I have enjoyed the variety of discussions we have had concerning 'the life, universe and everything.' I have learnt a great deal from you, not just about research but concerning the world. Also, I'd like to thank Simone and in recent times Sean for their friendship. Finally I'd like to thank my parents, Doug and Julie along with my two brothers, Michael and Tristan, for their love and support. A special mention must also go to mum for running a number of the simulations included in chapter 5.

# Table of Contents

Declaration.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables .....	viii
List of Figures .....	xii
List of Abbreviations .....	xvii
List of Parameter Definitions.....	xx
Abstract .....	xxi
Chapter 1: General Introduction .....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Objectives .....	2
1.2.1 Available Growth and Composition Models .....	3
1.2.2 Estimating Growth Model Input Parameters .....	6
1.2.3 Allocating Animals to Market Endpoints .....	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	8
2.1. Introduction.....	8
2.2. Characteristics of Animal Growth .....	8
2.2.1. Pre-Natal Growth .....	10
2.2.2. Post-Natal Growth .....	12
2.2.3. Restricted Growth .....	14
2.2.4. Weight Stasis .....	17
2.2.5. Weight Loss .....	17
2.2.6. Realimentation .....	20
2.2.7. Other Environmental Factors .....	25
2.2.8. Practical Implications.....	27
2.3. Decision Support Systems .....	28
2.4. Growth Functions.....	31
2.4.1. Empirical Functions.....	31
2.4.2. Multiphasic Functions.....	34
2.4.3. Animal Growth Simulation Models.....	36
2.4.4. Body Composition Models .....	47
2.5. Deriving optimal solutions.....	51

2.6. Search Methods for Optimisation .....	52
2.7. Deterministic vs Stochastic Search Methods .....	53
2.7.1. Deterministic Search Methods .....	53
2.7.2. Stochastic Search Methods .....	57
2.8. Optimisation in Agriculture .....	66
2.9. Summary .....	71
Chapter 3: Models for Predicting Body Weight .....	72
3.1. Introduction .....	72
3.2. Materials and Methods .....	74
3.2.1. Criteria for Selecting Suitable Growth Functions .....	74
3.2.2. Feeding and Growth Data .....	75
3.2.3. Growth Functions .....	77
3.2.4. Model Validation .....	95
3.3. Results .....	99
3.3.1. Parameter Estimation .....	99
3.3.2. Model Prediction .....	101
3.4. Discussion .....	104
3.5. Conclusion .....	112
3.6. Recommendations .....	112
Chapter 4: Models for Predicting Body Composition .....	113
4.1. Introduction .....	113
4.2. Materials and Methods .....	115
4.2.1. Development and Parameterisation of Body Composition Models .....	115
4.2.2. Validation of Body Composition Models .....	126
4.3. Results .....	129
4.3.1. Development and Parameterisation of Body Composition Models .....	129
4.3.2. Validation of Body Composition Models .....	135
4.4. Discussion .....	145
4.4.1. Development and Parameterisation of Body Composition Models .....	145
4.4.2. Validation of Body Composition Models .....	150
4.4.3. General Discussion .....	155
4.5. Conclusion .....	158
4.6. Recommendations .....	158
Chapter 5: Model Parameters for Cohorts .....	159

5.1. Introduction.....	159
5.2. Materials and Methods.....	161
5.2.1. Feeding and Growth Data .....	161
5.2.2. Parameter Estimation .....	163
5.2.3. Predictive Ability .....	168
5.3. Results.....	171
5.3.1. Parameter Estimation .....	171
5.3.2. Predictive Ability .....	176
5.4. Discussion .....	180
5.5. Conclusion .....	185
5.6. Recommendations.....	186
Chapter 6: Drafting of Cohorts .....	187
6.1. Introduction.....	187
6.2. Materials and Methods.....	189
6.2.1. Simulated Production System .....	189
6.2.2. Feeding and Growth Model .....	196
6.2.3. Production Scenarios .....	202
6.2.4. Animal Allocation to Markets .....	202
6.2.5. Graphical User Interface .....	205
6.3. Results.....	205
6.4. Discussion .....	216
6.4.1. Methodology .....	220
6.5. Conclusion .....	228
6.6. Recommendations.....	229
Chapter 7: General Discussion.....	230
7.1. Introduction.....	230
7.2. Available Models .....	230
7.2.1. Feeding and Growth Models.....	230
7.2.2. Body Composition Models .....	232
7.3. Estimating Input Parameters .....	234
7.4. Optimising Market Allocation .....	237
7.5. Future Directions .....	240
7.5.1. Potential Model Developments.....	241
7.5.2. Recommendations.....	245

7.5.3. Potential Applications.....	246
References.....	250
Appendix.....	292

## List of Tables

Table 3.1: The number of constants, fitted and total parameters contained in each of the growth models described above.....	95
Table 3.2: The MSE, SD of the MSE, adjusted $R^2$ values and error SD ( $\sigma_e$ ) averaged across animals from parameter estimation are presented for each model tested along with their respective degrees of freedom ( $df$ ). .....	100
Table 3.3: The MSE, SD of the MSE, adjusted $R^2$ values and error SD ( $\sigma_e$ ) averaged across animals and replicates from model prediction testing using the Trangie, training and test datasets, are presented for each model tested along with their respective degrees of freedom ( $df$ ).....	101
Table 3.4: The MSE, SD of the MSE, adjusted $R^2$ values and error SD ( $\sigma_e$ ) averaged across animals and replicates from model prediction testing using the Beef CRC dataset are presented for each model along with their respective degrees of freedom ( $df$ ).....	103
Table 3.5: The number of animals, out of the 57 animals contained in the Trangie dataset, whose estimates were anchored against the search space boundaries for each parameter in the models tested along with the number of animals who had more than 1 parameter anchored against the search space boundaries. The parameter numbers below represent the order that the parameters are listed in Table 3.1 (e.g. Freer Parameter No. 1 below is <i>SRW</i> from Table 3.1). .....	106
Table 4.1: Estimated parameters ( $\pm$ s.e.) and $R^2$ values for the allometric relationships contained in the ActEBW model. ....	130
Table 4.2: Estimated parameters ( $\pm$ s.e.) and $R^2$ values for the allometric relationships contained in the DOM model.....	130
Table 4.3: Estimated parameters ( $\pm$ s.e.) and $R^2$ values for the allometric relationships contained in the HDOM model.....	131
Table 4.4: Estimated parameters ( $\pm$ s.e.) and $R^2$ values for the allometric relationships between protein content of the body components and the whole empty body. ....	132
Table 4.5: Estimated parameters ( $\pm$ s.e.) and $R^2$ values for the allometric relationships between ash and protein contents of bone, viscera and blood along with the coefficients for the linear regressions between ash and protein in flesh and skin. ....	133
Table 4.6: Estimated parameters ( $\pm$ s.e.) and $R^2$ values for the allometric relationships between water and protein contents of the body components. ....	133



Table 4.7: Estimated parameters ( $\pm$ s.e.) and $R^2$ values for the allometric relationships between lipid and protein contents of the body components used in the ChemDOM1 model.....	134
Table 4.8: Estimated ratios between lipid content of the body components ( $L_{mi}$ ) and lipid content of the whole empty body ( $L_m$ ) at maturity used in the alternative allometric relationships contained in the ChemDOM2 model. ....	135
Table 4.9: Linear regression parameters ( $\pm$ s.e.) and $R^2$ values for predicting flesh contained in carcass and non-carcass components of the empty body. ....	135
Table 4.10: The MSE, SD of MSE and $R^2$ values averaged across animals for all the body composition models tested in T1 when using EBW estimates made by the growth model presented by Amer and Emmans (1998). ....	136
Table 4.11: The MSE, SD of MSE and $R^2$ values averaged across animals for all the body composition models tested in T1 when using actual EBW measurements taken prior to slaughter. ....	137
Table 4.12: The MSE, SD of MSE and $R^2$ values averaged across animals for the ActEBW, DOM, HDOM and ChemDOM2 models tested in T2. ....	141
Table 4.13: The MSE, SD of MSE and $R^2$ values for each trait predicted in T1 averaged across animals for the ActEBW, DOM, HDOM and ChemDOM2 models. ....	142
Table 4.14: The MSE, SD of MSE and $R^2$ values for each trait predicted in T2 averaged across animals for the ActEBW, DOM, HDOM and ChemDOM2 models. ....	143
Table 5.1: Weighted residual sums of squares (WRSS), growth model parameter estimates and standard deviations averaged across 10 replicates presented with the between replicate variation. ....	172
Table 5.2: Comparison of the average weight and standard deviation outputs made by deterministic and random sampling with data taken from the Trangie experiment. .	173
Table 5.3: Comparison of correlations between weights at different ages produced by deterministic and random sampling with data taken from the Trangie experiment. .	174
Table 5.4: Number of sampled observations and optimisation runtime (seconds) for 5,000 DE generations when estimating parameters with deterministic and random sampling. ....	175
Table 5.5: The MSE, SD of MSE, $R^2$ and error SD ( $\sigma_e$ ) values averaged across animals using the Trangie dataset are presented to compare the predictive ability of	

the parameters estimated by EIP with those estimated using deterministic and random sampling.....	176
Table 5.6: The MSE, SD of MSE, $R^2$ and error SD ( $\sigma_e$ ) values averaged across animals using the Beef CRC dataset are presented to compare the transportability of the parameters estimated by EIP with those estimated using deterministic and random sampling.....	178
Table 5.7: The MSE, SD of MSE, $R^2$ and error SD ( $\sigma_e$ ) values averaged across animals using the Trangie dataset are presented to compare the predictive ability of the parameters estimated using 37 data points and EIP with those estimated using deterministic and random sampling when only using data for 250 and 450 days of age. ....	179
Table 6.1: Slaughter characteristics of the markets available in the simulated production system.....	190
Table 6.2: Live animal characteristics at feedlot entry for those markets that require animals to spend periods of time in feedlots prior to slaughter. ....	191
Table 6.3: Example of a slaughter grid used to determine the value of individual carcasses destined for the heavy supermarket trade. ....	193
Table 6.4: Relation between AusMeat marble score and chemically extracted intramuscular fat (IMF %) at the 12/13 <sup>th</sup> rib site taken from Bindon (2001b). ....	201
Table 6.5: Simulation printout detailing carcass characteristics, market allocation, income and cost of 10 selected animals. The market allocation thresholds, drafting ages and total profitability of the production system are also presented for scenario 1. ....	207
Table 6.6: Simulation printout detailing carcass characteristics, market allocation, income and cost of 10 selected animals. The market allocation thresholds, drafting ages and total profitability of the production system are also presented for the second scenario when the value of the Japanese B3 market is reduced. ....	209
Table 6.7: Simulation printout detailing carcass characteristics, market allocation, income and cost of 10 selected animals. The market allocation thresholds, drafting ages and total profitability of the production system are also presented for the third scenario when drought reduces pasture availability. ....	211
Table 6.8: Simulation printout detailing carcass characteristics, market allocation, income and cost of 10 selected animals. The market allocation thresholds, drafting ages and total profitability of the production system are also presented for the fourth	

scenario when increased production costs reduce the profitability of the Japanese B3 market. ....	213
Table 6.9: Allocation pattern across the 4 scenarios explored for 10 selected animals along with their growth model input parameters. ....	214
Table 6.10: Comparison between carcass characteristics and profitability of animals 3, 4 and 8 if grown for the European Union and Japanese B3 markets, in Scenario 4..	215
Table 6.11: Comparison between carcass characteristics and profitability of animals 5, 7 and 9 if grown for the Heavy Supermarket and European Union markets, in scenarios 2 and 3.....	216
Table A.1: Allocation patterns across the 4 scenarios explored for all 100 animals along with each animals growth model input parameters.....	296

## List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Normal (—) pattern of foetal growth in cattle adapted from the data of Winters et al. (1942) and a retarded (---) pattern of foetal growth. ....	11
Figure 2.2: A sigmoidal curve representing growth beginning at conception when no restrictions are preventing potential from being reached.....	12
Figure 2.3: Changes in proportion of total body bone, muscle and fat with increasing maturity in body weight of British bred cattle (data taken from Moulton et al. (1922)). .....	14
Figure 2.4: Changes in proportion of total body bone, muscle and fat with increasing age of British bred cattle when fed <i>ad libitum</i> (a) and restricted (b) quantities of the same diet (data taken from Moulton et al. (1922)). ....	16
Figure 2.5: Percentage changes in weights of muscle, bone, carcass fat and full body weight (FBW) following grow-on (approximately 55 days) and weight loss phases (75 days) of merino wethers, relative to their weights immediately prior to the growing-on phase, modified from Aziz et al. (1992). ....	19
Figure 2.6: Percentage changes in weights of muscle, bone, carcass fat and full body weight (FBW) following grow-on (in excess of 40 days) and weight loss phases (in excess of 70 days) of Angus steers, relative to their weights immediately prior to the growing-on phase, modified from Seebeck and Tulloh (1968b). ....	20
Figure 2.7: An example of compensatory growth where an animal has recovered its weight-for-age and subsequently followed an <i>ad libitum</i> curve (modified from Hogg (1991))......	21
Figure 2.8: An example of compensatory growth most commonly seen where the growth period of the animal is extended (modified from Hogg (1991)). ....	22
Figure 2.9: Permanent stunting as a result of nutritional restriction where the animal does not reach the expected mature weight (modified from Hogg (1991)). ....	23
Figure 2.10: Interspecific relationship of Brody's maturing interval to mature weight, modified from Taylor (1965). ....	33
Figure 2.11: Idealised schematic of a three phase growth curve taken from Sørensen et al. (2003a). For phase, $i$ ( $i = 1, 2, 3$ ), $A_i$ is the upper asymptotic body weight of the phase, $c_i$ is the time of maximum increase of the phase and $b_i$ (not shown) is a measure of the duration of the phase. ....	35

Figure 2.12: Schematic of single point crossover used by a binary GA modified from Gondro (2005).....	64
Figure 2.13: Single point bit-flip mutation used by a binary GA modified from Gondro (2005).....	64
Figure 2.14: The basic mechanisms that operate within DE taken from Price and Storn (1997).....	66
Figure 3.1: Partitioning of ME with increasing ME intake for a 300 kg steer consuming a short-fed feedlot ration commonly used in Australian feedlots. ....	89
Figure 3.2: Average confidence intervals of fitted models in comparison to the Trangie data averaged across animals.....	100
Figure 3.3: Average confidence intervals from model prediction testing using the Trangie, training and test datasets in comparison to the Trangie data averaged across animals. ....	102
Figure 3.4: Average confidence intervals from model prediction testing using the Beef CRC dataset and parameters estimated from the Trangie dataset in comparison to the Beef CRC data averaged across animals. ....	104
Figure 3.5: Smoothed weight and feed intake curves in comparison to actual data of 2 steers grown at the NSW Agriculture Research Centre, Trangie, New South Wales. ....	110
Figure 4.1: Diagrammatic representation of the allometric relationships between body component weights and empty body weight. * Prediction of Head/Tail/Feet is described below. ....	118
Figure 4.2: Allometric square illustrating the maturing patterns associated with $b$ values of $<1$ , $=1$ and $>1$ , taken from Taylor and Murray (1987).....	119
Figure 4.3: Hierarchical organisation of allometric relationships using degree of maturity of the previous stage as the basis (e.g. $Bone \sim a_2 \cdot \mu_{HTF}^{b_2}$ ). * Prediction of Head/Tail/Feet is described below.....	121
Figure 4.4: Physical and chemical perspectives of empty body composition including an illustration of the approaches taken to predict physical body composition from chemical composition using allometric relationships (where EBW P is the protein content of the EBW, etc).....	122
Figure 4.5: Observed vs predicted weight of flesh (a), bone (b) and other (c) for the ActEBW, ChemDOM1 and two Song and Dinkel (1978b) models tested during T1	

using EBW estimates made by the growth model presented by Amer and Emmans (1998).....	138
Figure 4.6: Observed vs predicted weight of flesh (a), bone (b) and other (c) for the ActEBW, ChemDOM1 and the two models developed by Song and Dinkel (1978b) tested during T1 when using actual EBW measurements taken prior to slaughter. ..	140
Figure 4.7: Observed vs predicted weight of flesh (a), bone (b), viscera (c) and remainder (d) for the ActEBW, DOM, HDOM and ChemDOM2 models tested during T2. ....	144
Figure 4.8: Comparison of the allometry of bone (red) and viscera (mauve) relative to EBW predicted from the DOM (squares) and HDOM (line) models with allometric coefficients ( <i>b</i> ) of 1.9, 1 and 0.5 (grey lines) also illustrated. ....	155
Figure 5.1: Graphical description of the parameter estimation process followed when testing deterministic and random sampling. ....	164
Figure 5.2: Comparison of random (a) and deterministic (b) sampling from a true normal distribution.....	166
Figure 5.3: Variable criterion values produced by stochastic random sampling (♦) that produces upward selection bias (●) in comparison to deterministic methods (—). ..	168
Figure 5.4: Comparison of the predicted protein (a) and lipid (b) accretion patterns and their variation produced by using parameter estimates 2 standard deviations from the means given in Table 5.1 for random (—) and deterministic (—) sampling.....	173
Figure 5.5: Distribution of the 2,000 (a) and 729 (b) observations taken across the parameter space by random (a) and deterministic (b) sampling, respectively.....	175
Figure 5.6: Confidence intervals of prediction when using the parameters estimated by EIP and those estimated with deterministic and random sampling in comparison to the Trangie data averaged across animals.....	177
Figure 5.7: Confidence intervals of prediction when using the parameters estimated by EIP and those estimated with deterministic and random sampling in comparison to the Beef CRC data averaged across animals. ....	179
Figure 5.8: Trangie data averaged across animals in comparison to the confidence intervals of prediction when using the parameters estimated by EIP with 37 data points and those estimated with deterministic and random sampling using only data for 250 and 450 days of age.....	180
Figure 6.1: Interface that uses a graphical representation of the slaughter characteristics of the markets in Table 6.1 and allows those available to a given	

simulated production system to be selected. The characteristics printed on the right hand side are the slaughter characteristics of the selected markets. ....	192
Figure 6.2: Example of the linear plateau system used to model price premiums for marbling in the Japanese B2 market. ....	194
Figure 6.3: Annual cycle of green and dead pasture production along with total available pasture for the simulated production system obtained from the average of twenty years (1980-1999) of simulation for the Glen Innes Agricultural Research and Advisory Station using the GrassGro decision support system (Moore et al. 1997). ....	196
Figure 6.4: An example of how the Random Key Representation is used when attempting to solve the TSP. City 2 inherits the lowest RK and is thus the first-ordered city while city 6 inherits the highest and is ordered last. ....	203
Figure 6.5: Representation of random keys used by Differential Evolution that includes the drafting thresholds and drafting ages used to draft animals into their most appropriate markets.....	204
Figure 6.6: Drafting points and percentage of animals partitioned between market cohorts in scenario 1. Large deviations created immediately following a drafting age are the result of phenotypic selection which results from drafting decisions made by Differential Evolution. ....	206
Figure 6.7: Drafting points and partitioning of animals between market cohorts in the second scenario when the value of the Japanese B3 market is reduced. ....	208
Figure 6.8: Drafting points and partitioning of animals between market cohorts in the third scenario when drought reduces pasture availability.....	210
Figure 6.9: Drafting points and partitioning of animals between market cohorts in the fourth scenario when increased production costs reduce the profitability of the Japanese B3 market.....	212
Figure 6.10: Simulation interface displaying the live weight and carcass growth pathways as well as feed intake patterns for the optimal drafting plan found in scenario 2. ....	222
Figure 6.11: Production operations associated with the calf and market cohorts in scenario 2. ....	223
Figure 7.1: Example of the flexibility desired in a drafting DSS to handle a shift in focus from a system targeted at two market end-points (a) to one targeted at three (b). ....	247

Figure 7.2: Example of growth models providing information for the decision making process within a supply chain where growth is manipulated to meet both processing and production objectives. ....	248
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## List of Abbreviations

ActEBW	Actual Empty Body Weight
ADIP	Acid Detergent Insoluble Protein
AFRC	Agricultural and Food Research Council
ARC	Agricultural Research Council
B3	Japanese B3
BRD	Bovine Respiratory Disease
BSE	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
BSV	Blood/Skin/Viscera
BT1	Biological-Type 1
BT2	Biological-Type 2
CF	Crude Fibre
ChemDOM	Chemical Degree of Maturity
CHTF	Carcass/Head/Tail/Feet
CNCPS	Cornell Net Carbohydrate and Protein System
CP	Crude Protein
CPC	Crude Protein Content
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DCP	Digestible Crude Protein
DE	Differential Evolution
DigE	Digestible Energy
DM	Dry Matter
DMD	Dry Matter Digestibility
DOM	Degree of Maturity (model)
DP	Dermal Protein
DPLS	Digestible Protein leaving the Stomach
DPLSm	Digestible Protein Leaving the Stomach from microbes
DSS	Decisions Support Systems
EBV	Estimated Breeding Value
EBW	Empty Body Weight
EFP	Endogenous Faecal Protein
EIP	Estimating Individual Parameters

EM	Expectation Maximisation
EP	Evolutionary Programming
EPP	Estimating Population Parameters
ES	Evolutionary Strategies
EU	European Union
EUP	Endogenous Urinary Protein
FBW	Full Body Weight
FFM	Fat Free Matter
FMEI	Fermentable Metabolisable Energy Intake
GA	Genetic Algorithm
GE	Gross Energy
GF	Gut Fill
GH	Growth Hormone
HC	Hot Carcass
HDOM	Hierarchical Degree of Maturity
HS	Heavy Supermarket
IDCP	Ideal Digestible Crude Protein
IMF	Intramuscular Fat Percentage
JSSP	Job Shop Scheduling Problem
LCS	Learning Classifier Systems
LW	Live Weight
MCP	Microbial Crude Protein
ME	Metabolisable Energy
MEE	Maintenance Effective Energy
MEI	Metabolisable Energy Intake
MJ	Mega Joules
MSE	Mean Squared Error
MW	Mature Weight
NE	Net Energy
NRC	National Research Council
P8	P8 Fat Depth
QTL	Quantitative Trait Loci
RDP	Rumen Degradable Protein
RFI	Residual Feed Intake

RK	Random Key Representation
RMD	Remainder
RUP	Rumen Undegradable Protein
SCA	Standing Committee on Agriculture
SB	Separable Bone
SD	Standard Deviation
SF	Separable Fat
SM	Separable Muscle
SSE	Sums of Squares of Error
SST	Total Sums of Squares
TAMU	Texas A&M University
TDN	Total Digestible Nutrients
TGRM	Total Genetic Resource Management
TSP	Travelling Salesman Problem
UDP	Rumen Indigestible Protein
WRSS	Weighted Residual Sums of Squares

## List of Parameter Definitions

$b$	Differential Growth Ratio (Allometric Coefficient)
$B^*$	General Rate Parameter
$B_s$	Scaled Rate Parameter
$P_m$	Mature Protein Content
$Q$	Mature Lipid to Protein Ratio
SRW	Standard Reference Weight
$W_o$	Birth Weight

## **Abstract**

The continuous need for improved agricultural production efficiency requires that a greater quantity and quality of information is available for producers to base their decisions upon. This information pertains to current production circumstances (e.g. production levels, price structures and environmental conditions) as well as the outcomes from scientific research. The incorporation of scientific findings into decision support systems (DSS) is increasing the use of available production information and allowing different production scenarios to be explored in order to help improve the quality of decisions made. However, most current DSS do not have the capacity to determine what decisions would be optimal for a given production system. Instead they simply support decisions by predicting possible outcomes that are not immediately obvious and/or obtainable. Scientific outcomes can be incorporated into DSS in the form of simulation models that describe the system under consideration. In the context of beef cattle production, decisions relating to drafting, feeding, marketing, logistics and breeding could be optimised based on the output from a feeding and growth model. The successful application of a DSS of this nature would rely on how indicative the model is of animal growth and development in a variety of production environments and for different animal types.

## **Predictive Ability of Feeding and Growth Models**

Developing mathematical equations to represent the growth of animals is not a new science and has taken many forms during the last century. These range from single equations that fit growth as a function of time to growth simulation models that consider information relating to age, feed intake, feed quality, environmental influences and genetic capacity of animals. Chapter 3 uses a number of criteria to narrow down the models available in the literature and test the capacity of the remaining growth models to predict weight changes, when age and feed intake information is available. The accuracy of model predictions was determined by comparing observed body weights with predicted body weights. This was achieved by keeping breed and sex as well as the nutritional and external environments constant while using model input parameters estimated in external populations. The robustness of the models was determined by testing how accurately models predicted body

weights using data sets that differ in nutritional and external environments but contained the same breed and sex (i.e. Angus steers).

Parameter estimation to test model accuracy revealed that models of a more simplistic nature (polynomial, Gompertz (1825)) and that only consider limited information (e.g. age) provided more accurate fits to live weight data than models that are more complex (Freer (1997), Amer (1998)) and also require larger quantities of information (e.g. feed intake, feed quality). The difference in ability to fit data between the simplistic and complex models is a consequence of the more complex models containing a large number of biological principles which constrains them to follow what is considered to be sensible growth patterns. In contrast, the simplistic models contain few biological principles, if any (polynomial), which allows them the flexibility to alter their shape to match the data. It was also found that the inherently biologically rich structures of the more complex models resulted in a greater number of parameter estimates being anchored against search space boundaries. This occurred as a consequence of the optimisation procedure attempting to achieve the lowest residual sums of squares possible. This is not a desirable outcome and points toward the need to increase the amount of information available to the growth model and the possibility of developing an alternative method for estimating growth model input parameters.

Model robustness was assessed firstly by using datasets to test the transferability of parameter estimates between animal populations when environmental, breed and sex effects were identical. Secondly, other datasets were used for the purpose of testing the transferability of parameter estimates between animal populations when controlling breed and sex effects but allowing nutritional components of the environment to change. In both cases the Freer (1997) and Amer (1998) models were shown to have greater predictive abilities with this being most evident in the results obtained when the nutritional environment changed. This was attributed to both the type of information these models considered, including feed quality (e.g. metabolisable energy and crude protein content) and the inherently biologically rich structure of these models.

## Development and Testing of Body Composition Models

The markets serviced by the Australian Beef industry, although different, all have requirements that relate to the physical quantities of carcasses. Thus, to be able to optimise any decisions that relate to these characteristics a model is required that is capable of accurately partitioning the whole body into its physical quantities. There is a lack of such models available in the literature. Chapter 4 attempted to address this by developing a number of models that are based around allometric equations. The predictive ability of these models, when empty body weight was given and growth was occurring *ad libitum*, was tested in comparison to two models taken from the literature.

The allometric coefficients (*b*) estimated for the models developed in chapter 4 represented sensible patterns of body component development. The estimated allometric constants (*a*) partitioned the empty body into sensible proportions of flesh, bone, viscera, blood and skin at maturity, e.g. flesh represented the highest proportion while blood represented the smallest, following *ad libitum* growth. The first ‘chemical degree of maturity’ model developed in this study was found to have a predictive ability that was inferior to the physical body composition models taken from the literature. The remaining four models developed in this study had predictive abilities that were found to be superior to the models taken from the literature. The second ‘chemical degree of maturity’ model was found to consistently have the lowest predictive ability of these four models. The hierarchical degree of maturity (HDOM) model was found to perform at a consistent level, although not always the best. The predictive abilities of the actual empty body weight (ActEBW) and degree of maturity (DOM) models varied with how data were presented for testing. When data were presented as bone, flesh and non-carcass the DOM model had a superior predictive ability compared to the ActEBW model. In contrast, the ActEBW model had a greater predictive ability when non-carcass was presented as viscera and remainder. Flesh weight was found to be predicted with the greatest accuracy by all models tested (e.g.  $R^2 = 0.999$  for the HDOM, DOM and ActEBW models).

## **Estimating Model Input Parameters for Animal Cohorts**

The diversity present in animal growth is a fact that most growth simulation models do not take into consideration. These models are developed to represent what are perceived to be ‘average’ animals without considering between-animal variation. It has been determined that the responses produced by such models are different to the average responses of an animal population, because of the non-linear relationship between model input parameters and model outputs. This has led to the realisation that it would be desirable for models to consider between-animal variation particularly when they are used to represent whole production systems and/or for economic optimisation. Chapter 5 explored the speed and accuracy of different methods used for sampling from a simulated population during inverted modelling to estimate growth model population parameters by matching model outputs to observed population parameters (mean and standard deviation of body weight at 250, 450, 650 and 1250 days of age).

Stochastic sampling from parameter distributions produces sampling errors that reduce accuracy unless very large numbers of samples are taken. Deterministic sampling is a fully repeatable method that offers the opportunity to overcome these sampling errors. The difference in accuracy between deterministic and stochastic sampling was found to approach statistical significance ( $p=0.077$ ) when estimating growth model input parameters. Greater uncertainty was associated with the parameter estimates made using stochastic random sampling. The predictive ability of the parameter estimates made by both methods was tested in comparison to those estimated in chapter 3, which Estimated Individual animal Parameters (EIP) and subsequently calculated parameter averages and standard deviations. The parameters estimated by EIP were found to have the greatest predictive ability, probably because they used all age and feed intake data available. This predictive ability was reduced when tested with a second less information-rich dataset. The parameters estimated by both sampling methods were found to be more accurate for this dataset. When even smaller quantities of data were available the parameters estimated using deterministic sampling had greater predictive abilities than those estimated with either random sampling or EIP.



## Selective Drafting of Cohorts

The efficiency of animal production is a function of how the available resources are used to achieve the desired outcomes of a production system. Drafting animals into cohorts is a practice commonly used to help manipulate animal growth to meet the physical constraints of production systems. Drafting also offers the opportunity to take advantage of the diversity that is inherently present in animal growth by matching animals to the needs of different target markets as well as the opportunity to use different management options for these markets. The growth and composition models tested in chapters 3 and 4 along with the input parameters estimated in chapter 5 were combined within a simulated production system to predict growth outcomes in chapter 6. These predictions formed the basis of a method that uses the random keys representation (RK) to draft animals into market cohorts that are custom managed to the market's needs and appropriate for the animals' growth potentials.

Four production scenarios similar to those that have been seen in the Australian production environment were used to test how drafting with Differential Evolution (DE) using RK reacts to different prevailing production conditions. DE drafted animals toward the Heavy Supermarket (HS), European Union (EU) or Japanese B3 (B3) markets under optimal conditions in scenario 1. In scenario 2, when the value of the B3 market was reduced, DE reallocated animals into either the HS or EU markets. In response to this reallocation new optimal slaughter ages were determined to compensate for animals with higher mature protein ( $P_m$ ) and general growth rate ( $B^*$ ) parameters being included in the EU market. The lower slaughter age of 590 days also prevented some animals allocated to the EU market in scenario 1 from achieving the desired carcass characteristics in scenario 2 resulting in them being reallocated to the HS market.

The allocation of animals to market cohorts by DE was explored in scenario 3 when drought conditions reduced pasture availability. A distinct outcome in this scenario was the depressed growth trajectories of all market cohorts. The animals allocated to the B3 market were identical to those allocated in scenario 1, indicating that even though the growth of these animals was suppressed due to the drought conditions they were able to achieve the carcass characteristics required by the B3 market when

feedlotted. In contrast to scenario 1, more animals were allocated to the HS and less to the EU markets. Animals that were reallocated were either unable to attain the carcass characteristics required by the EU market or the carcass they produced was less valuable than the carcass they produced for the HS market. Scenario 4 explored what impact increased costs of production in the B3 market would have on animal allocation. The profitability of some animals was still at its maximum when allocated to the B3 market even though the costs of production were elevated. However, the majority of animals from the B3 market in scenario 1 were reallocated to the EU market, which caused a reallocation of animals to the HS market, similar to what occurred in scenario 2. This reallocation occurred in conjunction with the optimal slaughter age for the EU market being reduced from 740 to 590 days. In scenarios 3 and 4, interactions between individual growth model input parameters along with interactions between the parameters and optimal slaughter ages had important impacts on the allocation of animals to market endpoints.

The behaviour of the drafting system was found to be sensible in each of the production scenarios presented. However, there are possible refinements that could be made to the predictive models and the optimisation procedure that would increase the number of production scenarios it could be applied to (e.g. include heifers, cows and bulls in the drafting process) and the confidence that can be placed in the results obtained. The most obvious of these changes would involve further development of linear regressions used to predict P8 fat depth and IMF percentage to include factors such as nutrition, breed and sex.

The methods developed and results obtained in this last chapter point to the feasibility of using growth models, animal data and decision support systems with optimisation engines to help drive a wide range of management decisions to best exploit animal performance and market opportunities.