In loving Memory of Professor William (Bill) Aalbersberg

The University of the South Pacific (USP) community was saddened by the passing of Professor William (Bill) Aalbersberg, the former Professor of Organic Chemistry at USP and former long-term Director of the Institute of Applied Sciences (IAS). Bill had passed away peacefully in his sleep in February this year and was surrounded by his family and friends. Professor Bill as he is commonly referred to had been with USP for more than 27 years. He served as the Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader in Chemistry and Professor of Natural Products Chemistry before becoming Director of the Institute of Applied Sciences from 1999 to 2014.

Professor Bill was passionate about his work and committed to building the capacity of regional staff and students. One of his defining characteristics was his ability to always view things from the institutional perspective—he was a strong institutional person, always willing to go the extra mile. Bill also combined his strengths as an academic with his strong management and engagement from which USP benefited enormously.

His innovative ideas changed the Institute of Applied Sciences into an internationally recognised and respected institute in the fields of conservation, laboratory analysis, biodiversity conservation and environmental management. His efforts led to the IAS laboratory achieving international accreditation, initiating an Access Benefit Sharing (ABS) process for bioprospecting research in natural products and he led many programmes aimed at building capacity of professionals and communities in the area of conservation and environmental science. His community-based management and integrated coastal management work was recognised with the Walter B Jones Memorial and National Oceanic and the Atmospheric Administration Excellence Awards for Coastal and Ocean Resource Management in 2005. He was also a co-founder of the Fiji Locally Managed Marine Areas network which was awarded the United Nations Equator Initiative Award in 2003.

Professor Bill had acquired funding to the tune of millions of dollars and was the recipient of many awards which enabled IAS to expand its scope of services and grow as an institute. His research work spanned a number of disciplines such as Natural Products Chemistry, Food Nutrients and Contaminant Analysis, Environmental Chemistry, Climate Change and Natural Resources Management. The outcomes of his work have influenced national policy development, trade and standards regulations and pioneering of framework that are currently being utilised in the areas of climate change and conservation.

Professor Bill has over 230 publications in key scientific research areas and has mentored and supervised many Masters and PhD students. He was also on the Editorial Board of numerous publication journals and the Head of numerous Government committees on Biodiversity, Trade and Standards, and Food and Nutrition.

One of the radical contributions he made in the discourse of resource management in Fiji and the Pacific is the emphasis on gender, specifically the involvement of women and their capacity enhancement in leadership and management in the traditional customary structure. Professor Bill walked the talk - a man committed in both words and actions. One of his many gifts was his ability to converse in a number of languages and local dialects. He will be remembered by his former students, colleagues and friends for his selfless and generous personality. He has left behind an outstanding legacy that we can further build on. He will be dearly missed and may he rest in peace.

USP holds a Memorial and Celebration of Life of the Late Professor Bill Aalbersberg

Various high profile speakers who have known and worked with Professor Bill for many years shared with the large audience present their memories of Professor Bill and his contributions to USP, Fiji and the Pacific region. Friends, colleagues and guests from across Fiji were present in numbers to celebrate his life. Among the speakers was the Vice-Chancellor and President of USP, Professor Rajesh Chandra who has known Professor Bill for decades. Professor Chandra mentioned that Professor Bill was "a scholar, a pioneer, a leader and a friend". He added that Professor Bill demonstrated the aspirations of USP in being innovative with solutions to regional and global conservation issues.

Mr Robin Yarrow, the Chairman of the IAS Advisory Board and a friend of Professor Bill remarked that in serving with Bill on the National Trust of Fiji, a role that he noted the late Professor took quite seriously to empower this important organisation, the only one of its kind in the region. His legacy is he has built IAS to a scientific services provider that is contributing effectively to developments in Fiji and the region.

The Dean of the Faculty of Science, Technology and Environment, Associate Professor Anjeela Jokhan reflected on being a former student of Professor Bill and later a colleague and now a Senior Manager at USP. She remembered Professor Bill as someone who recognised potential in people and who encouraged a working and learning environment where women are equally empowered to succeed.

A song about the late Professor Bill composed by Dr Isoa Korovulavula and Mr Tuvene Tuamoto was sung by the IAS staff members to thank and honour him. In recognition of Professor Bill’s contributions to USP and the region, an endemic tree species was planted and a plaque was unveiled in his memory.