The Star

‘Don’t be preoccupied with rankings alone’

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UNIVERSITIES need to prioritise students’ well-being and develop their thinking skills, says Zambry Abd Kadir.

At the same time, the Higher Education Minister said universities also need to focus on producing ethical and impactful research that benefits society.

“In essence, educators must prioritise top-quality teaching and learning experiences alongside impactful research and publication outcomes beneficial to society,” he said during the Times Higher Education (THE) Asia Universities Summit opening ceremony at Sunway University on April 29.

He said while Malaysia recognises the importance of university rankings as it serves as benchmarks, indicating where universities stand in comparison to their peers, that should not be our sole focus.

“We should strive for a holistic view of higher education and avoid being preoccupied with rankings alone,” he added.

Zambry said another trap of the rankings is falling into “isomorphic mimicry”, which is wholly imitating what is being done by another community.“Everyone wants to model after the idyllics in the world but at the same time, we tend to forget about the need to fulfil the societal needs of that particular country.

“This is our challenge – how can we strike the balance between the nation’s needs as well as maintain the status of our universities,” he said.

Zambry said over 600 delegates representing more than 160 organisations from 40 nations attended the summit aptly themed “Bridging Frontiers: Changing the Landscape of Education in Asia”.

He said universities should collaborate rather than compete among themselves as the higher education sector is facing many new challenges today.

“We need to harness the power of collaboration and partnerships. The most competitive institutions are those that excel in collaboration.

“There is immense synergistic and mutualistic benefit to be gained from sharing knowledge, experiences and resources,” he added.

He, however, said the challenges, including educating a generation that studied during the Covid-19 pandemic, had also brought many opportunities.

“This includes a growing appetite for international students to seek meaningful educational opportunities, the ability to learn, work and develop intellectually and professionally in a foreign country,” he said, adding that there are businesses looking to hire top talent, produced by the higher education institutions, in an increasingly competitive global market.

During the opening ceremony, THE president (APAC) Simone Dilena said, “In an era where we are witnessing an expansion in global higher education, with campuses opening across borders and student mobility rising, connectivity is key.”

Sunway University president Prof Sibrandes Poppema said delegates were there to learn from the best practices of other universities, make new friends and establish new collaborations.

This is the first time the summit, held from April 29 to May 1, was hosted in Malaysia.