KUALA LUMPUR: In an ambitious move to produce skilled Malaysians, the Government approved the opening of 1,908 public and private vocational training centres.

But something has gone terribly wrong.

Almost half the National Vocational Training Council (MLVK)-accredited centres have apparently thrown a spanner in the works, forcing the MLVK to take the unprecedented step of closing down 800 centres last year. Another 200 of the 1,108 public and private institutions, currently offering about 6,000 MLVK programmes to about 100,000 students nationwide, may face the same fate.

The council found many irregularities in the way the 800 centres were run.

Several thousand students have been affected by the closure of these centres. While most have found places in other centres, some are saddled with loans for courses they did not complete. Others do not have certificates.

MLVK director-general Wan Seman Wan Ahmad confirmed yesterday that the Human Resources Ministry was investigating 200 centres offering MLVK certification programmes to determine if they were providing quality training.

"We had been receiving complaints since 2003 about these institutions," he said.

"After investigations, we found many irregularities, including the fact that they did not keep up to the standards set by the MLVK. Last year, we deregistered 800 of them."

Some centres lacked competent lecturers or proper facilities and equipment. There was also non-compliance with the terms and conditions stipulated by the MLVK.

Other institutions did not even provide the required teaching materials.

"When the institutions applied to offer MLVK programmes, they initially adhered to all our standards and requirements. But, after some time, they failed to do so."

Most of the 800 institutions deregistered were in the Klang Valley.

More than 30,000 students pursued MLVK programmes at these institutions.

Courses offered by MLVK- accredited centres include motorcycle assembly, construction, agriculture industry, land transportation, electronic audio and video, and woodworking and furniture. Each course lasts between two and five years.

Asked to comment on the Ansted Skills Centre, deregistered by the MLVK for irregularities and whose 525 students have been left in the lurch, Wan Seman said:

"We are aware of it. The matter is being investigated. The ministry&#65533;s Skills Development Fund is also looking into it as the students claim they had taken loans from it."

The students claim they took loans of RM5,000 each to pay for the courses they pursued. They now had to repay the loans, but had not received any certificates to show for their studies.

Wan Seman said: "How are we to certify them when their names are not registered with us? It is like a student sitting for his Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination &#65533; he must register with the relevant authority, pay the fees and then sit for the exam. If he doesn&#65533;t register, then he is not entitled to sit for the exam or to get the certificate."

He advised those who enrolled for MLVK programmes to ensure that their names were registered with the MLVK by the institution concerned.

Wan Seman also urged students affected by the closure of such centres to write in.

An official with the Skills Development Fund said: "We only give loans for certain courses. The students apply for loans through the institutions, and the money is sent direct to the institutions concerned."

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Bleak prospects for 525 students without certs

PETALING JAYA: A one-year course that extended to three years, and exams with answers provided.

These were among the experiences of 525 students who had enrolled for the National Vocational Training Council (MLVK) programme in 2001 and 2002 in the Ansted Skills Centre branches in Klang, Kapar and Kuala Lumpur.

Four years later, they have yet to receive their Malaysian Skills Certificate.

The reason: The

centre closed down in 2004.

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Kalyani Kumaran, 25, said their information technology (IT) courses were supposed to be conducted over the span of one year but had to be extended because the lecturers had returned to India.

"When we complained, we were told the course had to be extended as there were no lecturers. So we attended classes but all we did was chat and fool around," she said.

V. Selva Murugan, 22, said: "Classes for us then became a playground."

Since there were no lecturers, Kalyani said they were all given answers for all the exams conducted.

Selva said: "Naturally, all of us scored 100 per cent in all our papers. Now, even if they award us with certificates we would not know what to do with it. If we secure jobs using those certificates, the bosses would assume we would know how to carry out the job, when in fact we don't know anything as we only had proper classes for six months."

With no certificate, and each having paid RM5,000 in fees, the students claimed they were now in a fix as they were being hounded by the Skills Development Fund (SDF) from which they had obtained loans.

"Those of us who have secured jobs did it using our SPM certificates," Selva said. "The centre never awarded us our certificates so how are we to repay our loans?"

The students also claimed the centre had helped them apply for loans from the fund and they were asked to open personal accounts at Bank Simpanan Nasional.

Upon enquiring with the centre two months later, they found the loans had been deposited directly into the centre's account.

Wanting their money back, the students took their problem to the National Consumer Complaints Centre (NCCC).

"We don't want to be blacklisted," said B. Murali, 22. "To get the loans, we needed guarantors and mine were my neighbours. Now, they are receiving letters demanding the money back as well and our relationship has been damaged."

Mohana Sinnan, 22, and her brother Kugan Sinnan, 25, who had enrolled at the Kapar Ansted Skills Centre, claimed they were supposed to study for a year but had classes for only two months.

"Our classrooms had no computers and electricity. When we asked why there were no classes, they kept saying 'tomorrow, tomorrow' but it has now been three years," said Kugan.

NCCC manager Darshan Singh said it had constantly received reports on MLVK courses and hoped the Human Resources Ministry would monitor institutions offering such courses more closely.

"In this case, instead of helping improve the students' futures, the centres have made them debtors."