SINGAPORE: Language barriers and the inability to adjust to living in Singapore are the two main causes of stress for foreign students.

University counsellors said these issues usually occur during the early phase of their move to Singapore.

And if these issues are not dealt with at the onset, it may lead to severe depression and loneliness.

According to a recent article in the "Alumnus" magazine, produced by the National University of Singapore, 60 percent of students seeking help at the NUS Counselling Centre are foreigners.

And they all fit a common profile.

They are from developing countries such as China, Vietnam and Sri Lanka, on shoestring budgets or scholarships and do not have a strong network of friends.

They face pressure to excel since they are required to do well to keep their scholarships.

If they do not, they will be sent home and face what the centre calls the very Asian term of "losing face".

It got so bad for one student at Singapore Management University (SMU), she decided to call it quits.

Timothy Hsi, University Counsellor, Singapore Management University, said: "She snapped in the midst of preparing for a presentation. When she stood up to rehearse for it, her friends laughed at her and said, 'Your English is really terrible!'. She cracked at that point, dropped everything and left the room crying. By the time a counsellor went to her, she had already made the decision to go back to her home country."

At SMU, there are peer helpers who are trained to look out for students in distress and to help them or refer them to counsellors.

The SMU Counselling Centre sees about 20 to 25 students, both local and foreign, each term.

As Singapore continues to attract students from the region to become an education hub, counsellors said there is also a need for multicultural counselling in the future.

For example, students from certain countries may be used to hierarchies and may not feel comfortable speaking to a counsellor whom he or she sees as a figure of authority.

So counsellors will have to apply different approaches, according to the cultural and national backgrounds of the students they help.

Besides SMU, both National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University have also launched 24-hour helplines for international students.