When Ms Chew Khoo Geh went to school for the first time, she was 11 years old and by far the oldest in her Primary 1 class. She did not even know the alphabet, could speak to teachers only in Mandarin and, by her own admission, “behaved about the same as a Primary 3 child.”

Years later, after working hard to earn a career as a diagnostic ophthalmic technician at the National University Hospital, the 24-year-old received the Healthcare Merit Award — a scholarship given to those with good academic results and a passion for healthcare.

She was one of 124 people to win the award and will pursue a degree in diagnostic radiography at the Singapore Institute of Technologies in September.

The Healthcare Merit Awards ceremony held at Raffles City Convention Centre saw scholarships given out to a total of 169 people for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

Ms Chew, who now has two brothers and a sister, growing up, her father was the sole breadwinner as her mother had serious health issues.

“My siblings and I became the caregivers to our mother. School was not a priority at that time. Recalling her first days in school, Ms Chew said that was “very, very hard” to catch up with the rest of her classmates. She was also worried about fitting in socially, although that did not turn out to be a problem, “I was quite short,” she said. “And mentally and psychologically, I believe about the same as a Primary 3 child.”

Despite the difficult start, Ms Chew went on to enter the Express stream and later graduated from Temasek Polytechnic with a diploma in biomedical science.

She recalled how, about five years ago, her mother began to lose her eyesight because of diabetes. By the time her family found out about it, the damage was already done.

“My vision was already impaired... I thought it was the end,” she said. “But I decided to do my O levels, which were coming up at the time. I thought that I knew nothing about the illness or healthcare. If I hadn’t known, we could have brought her to the hospital earlier.

It was this incident that made her determined to join the healthcare sector. She is currently working as a diagnostic ophthalmic technician.

Although her options in biomedical science gave her a foot in the door, she limped in to maturity laboratory work.

Ms Chew said what she really wanted was a role that would enable her to interact with patients. Hospital visits were always stressful occasions for her mother, she said, and the need to help alleviate such feelings for her own mother.

“I can understand how patients feel,” Ms Chew said. “I want to help them feel as relaxed as possible. I want to take away some of their suffering and pain.”

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong, who spoke at yesterday’s ceremony, said the newly minted scholarship holders bore the challenge of “changing... and meaningful work” that he had done in the coming years.

“Your journey has just begun — as a healthcare professional, you need to be equipped with both the hard and soft skills to serve your patients and community effectively.”

Ms Gan said he was referring to the professional skills needed in their chosen occupations, as well as traits like patience, empathy and compassion for the patients under their care.