Since she was 14, she wanted to be a clinical psychologist. She was also looking for something meaningful to do.

Getting the Social Service Scholarship in August 2007 helped to make that dream come true for Miss Alva Liow Chiew Shan, now 22.

After finishing her A levels at Victoria Junior College, she did administrative work while waiting for her results but found that boring.

So in April, she volunteered as a tutor at the Students Care Service (Hougang Branch) while waiting to enter the National University of Singapore (NUS) in August.

That was when she found her calling and decided to apply for the Social Service Scholarship. This, despite her first volunteering stint lasting only three months.

Miss Liow, who has an older brother and sister, said: "It was the first time I felt like I wanted to go back and do it all over again, although I wasn’t getting paid for it."

Initially, her taxi-driver father, 62, and housewife mother, 61, questioned her decision to enter the social service sector.

"(But) of course, they were glad when I got it (the scholarship), as it was a huge financial burden off their shoulders," she said.

The scholarship is provided by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) to attract and groom outstanding students with the passion to serve.

The local full-time scholarship Miss Liow is on includes course fees, book allowances and maintenance allowances.

After four years in NUS, Miss Liow graduated as valedictorian from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences with a Bachelor of Social Sciences (First Class Honours) in Psychology in July. She was on the Dean’s list for five semesters.

She was also the first scholar to be named valedictorian since NCSS started giving out scholarships in 1994.

During her second year in NUS, she spent her Saturday afternoons with schizophrenic patients at the Institute of Mental Health.

In her third year of undergraduate studies, Miss Liow started a voluntary internship at the National University Hospital observing clinically-depressed patients.

**Thesis project**

This later evolved into her thesis project in her final year, where she investigated how a depressed person’s outlook in life affects his or her level of depression.

Miss Liow is now looking for a job with a voluntary welfare organisation (VWO) as part of her scholarship bond with NCSS.

A spokesman for NCSS said a scholar’s “bond would usually be served at a VWO”. But NCSS would also take the scholars’ preference and developmental needs into consideration when assigning the agency for job placement.

The Social Service Scholarship bond can range from two to four years, depending on the type of degree the scholar is taking and type of scholarship awarded.

In Miss Liow’s case, she will have to serve a four-year bond.

For more information on the Social Service Scholarship, visit www.ncss.org.sg/VWOcorner/scholarship.asp