Dr Mohd Effendy Rajab is an associate lecturer at the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM).

But if you had told him when he was a child that he would grow up to be a teacher, he would never have believed you. He was not motivated as a student, did poorly at school and had hopes of becoming a sea captain. When his dream was dashed by a failed eyesight test, the 59-year-old made a living as a lifeguard and firefighter, among other occupations. His on-the-job experiences mean he is not simply teaching theories out of a textbook when he is in class.

The road to success was long and winding, reveals Dr Effendy, who is also the executive director of the Singapore Scout Association.

“I was a scout all my life and my ambition was to be on a ship, to take care of it,” says the stocky, grey-haired man.

“When my dreams were dashed because my eyesight was not good enough for the job, I became unmotivated and did not really want to study.”

He attended pre-university at St Patrick’s School but did not qualify for university. So he put on his swimming trunks and took on life-saving duties at swimming pools in Jurong and Yang Kit. When there was an opening at the fire service two years later in 1976, he jumped at the chance to lead a team of firemen.

“I’ve always loved uniforms and taking on leadership roles, so that job was exciting and fulfilling,” he says. For six years, he braved grisly sights such as smashed grey matter and dead bodies while on duty.

“I was churning inside but in front of my men, I could not show it,” he says with a chuckle.

It was only when he was 33 years old did the thought of pursuing a degree cross his mind.

Dr Effendy counts receiving his bachelor’s degree in human resource management in 1993 as one of the proudest moments in his life. But he hopes that it would help him advance in his company did not materialize.

“Along the way, I failed. I had to re-take the final exams of my diploma course because while I passed the management part of it, I flunked the finance bit. I was disappointed.”

“Teaching touches people’s lives. And to hear the students say, ‘If a late developer like you can do it, why can’t I?’ keeps me going,” says Dr Effendy.