

# From campus

They're smart, they're well-versed in a subject, and they can come into school two days a week. We find out why university students are the 'new' TAs in one part of the Midlands

By **Louise Tickle** Illustration **Nicholas Saunders**

**R**ousing classical music is playing in the background as 22-year-old Sadia Shariff moves around the room to see how the Year 9 students are coping with their long division. Sadia is in her final year studying mathematical sciences at the University of Wolverhampton. She's in class here at Bristnall Hall Technology College near Birmingham on a scheme run by The Black Country Challenge as part of the DCSF's City Challenge project, a drive to target underachievement in primary and secondary schools in three urban areas (the other

two are London and Manchester). The scheme that Sadia is on places maths and English university students in schools to support both pupils and teachers.

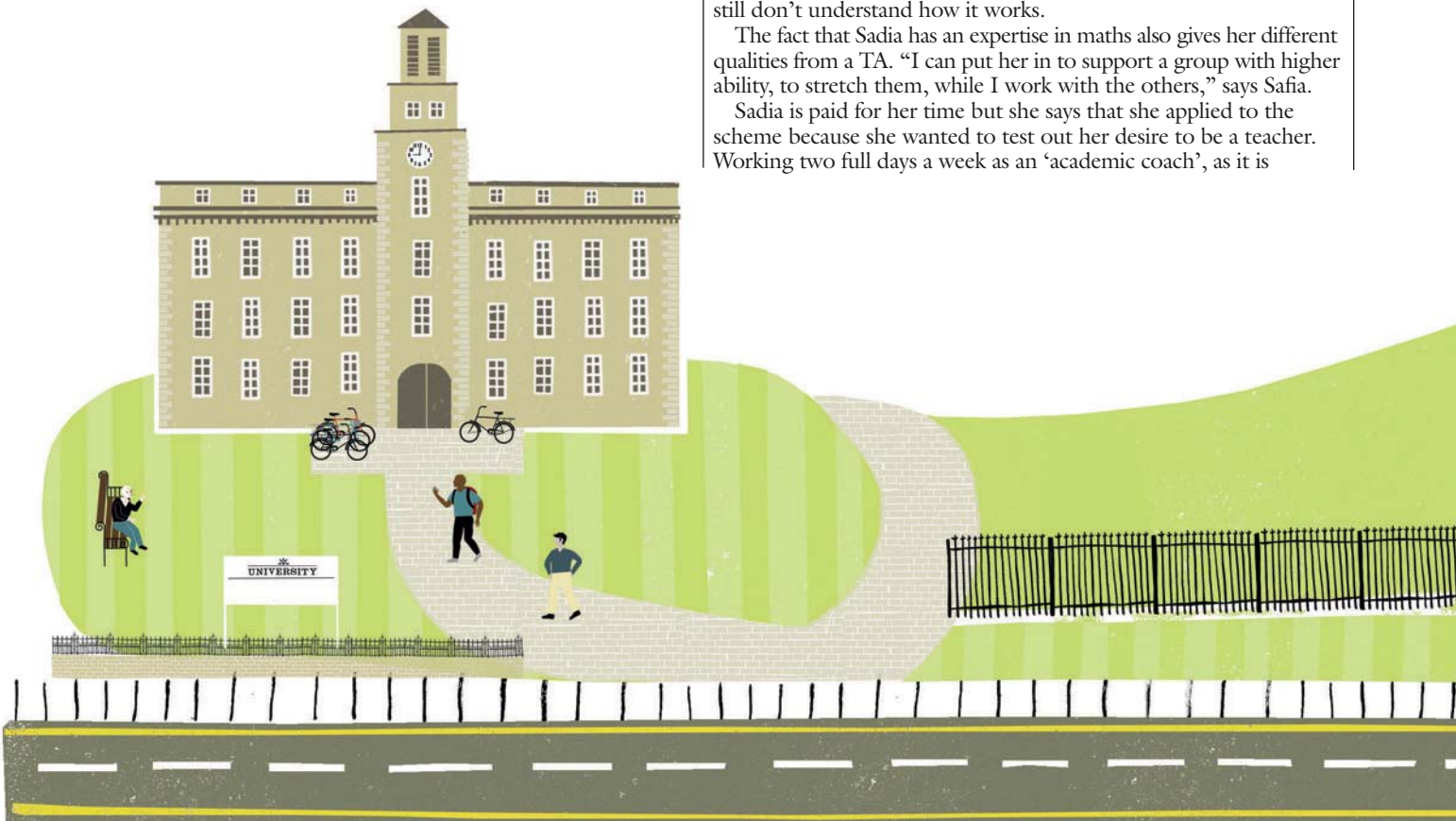
There are a couple of faintly desperate calls of "I don't get it, Miss", whereupon Sadia goes to help the children and take them through the sum, explaining carefully and slowly each step of the process. Meanwhile, head of maths Safia Ali is writing out another long division on the whiteboard and talking it through with the pupils who've already managed to finish the first.

"It doesn't matter how smart we are with our teaching if a child in the corner doesn't want to ask for help. Sadia can be my eyes and ears. Things I might miss, she can pick up," says Safia, as she and Sadia grab a quick cup of tea in the canteen during morning break. "I use her to support students I know are going to struggle in a certain area. And she's gained a lot of experience of how teaching works now – it's not about whole-class situations any more."

In some classes, Sadia explains that she will take students who lack concentration to the library to work with them on a one-to-one or small-group basis. And because the students don't see Sadia as a teacher, Safia points out, a different relationship is formed – they feel more comfortable admitting to her that, even though a method may have been explained several times, they still don't understand how it works.

The fact that Sadia has an expertise in maths also gives her different qualities from a TA. "I can put her in to support a group with higher ability, to stretch them, while I work with the others," says Safia.

Sadia is paid for her time but she says that she applied to the scheme because she wanted to test out her desire to be a teacher. Working two full days a week as an 'academic coach', as it is



# to classroom

known, means she has to be highly organised with her university studies, particularly in this, her final year. But she says that knowing she's made a difference to children from a challenging catchment who are struggling makes it worth the effort. "I like being where I'm needed," she says. "And I can see myself as a teacher now."

There's no doubt, says Antoinette Jackson, Bristnall Hall's student support team co-ordinator, who manages the scheme at the school, that Sadia's confidence has grown since she started. Going into boisterous classrooms is a test of anyone's mettle, particularly when the job is to support children who are known to be disruptive.

This is Sadia's task with two boys in the Year 8 maths lesson that follows break. The class is doing geometry, but students Jack and Gianni don't see a lot of point in working out the area of random shapes.

Gently, patiently, Sadia nudges them through the method as the rest of the class, in comparative terms, races ahead. There's a momentary flash when Gianni gets it, then his face falls as comprehension drains away. But quickly, Sadia pulls the boys' attention back by drawing a comparison with a sum they do understand.

It's easy to see how, without this unobtrusive but consistent support, these two pupils would

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lose motivation entirely as their experience of maths became identified with feelings of frustration and failure.

"They are quite a few levels behind the rest and they play up because they can't cope with the pace of the group," explains the boys' teacher,

Paul Lawrence. "With Sadia here, their behaviour has improved, and, on a basis of one half-term's work, I'd say that they have gone up two sub-levels."

According to headteacher Steve Venross, Sadia provides the school with additional support and expertise in a shortage subject. And for the pupils, having someone from their own area who has achieved in a 'difficult' subject raises aspirations.

"The scheme also gives undergraduates an insight into teaching," he says. He's agreed that the school will sponsor Sadia as she embarks on the GTP teacher-training route, which means she'll train on the job at Bristnall Hall. "It's turned out to be a valuable recruitment tool – we didn't know that would happen, but luckily it has."

### SUCCESS STORY

Since the scheme was launched in April, over 60 maths and English students from the University of Wolverhampton have been trained by The Black Country Challenge ([www.theblackcountrychallenge.co.uk](http://www.theblackcountrychallenge.co.uk)) to work as 'academic coaches' in secondary schools. The schools pay for the coaches, at a set rate of £8.33 per hour plus expenses. The DCSF covers the cost of recruitment, training and CRB checks. "It's win-win for schools, pupils and the students," says project manager Gayle Cosnett.

