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## Interview: Heading back to the classroom

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By Dina Medland

Apprenticeships are back in vogue as an alternative to an increasingly expensive university place. For many, it was always the only option: for Christine Broughan, a girl from a working class background, university was barely considered.

Her first career was as a technical apprentice, and then as a building surveyor in the construction industry – where she stayed for a decade.

However, what was to become a lifelong love of education and learning brought her to her current role as co-director of the Age Research Centre at Coventry University. It gives her a unique vantage point from which to view the problems of age discrimination and its real and potential capacity for economic harm.

“Apprenticeships were the preferred option then and I worked for a number of companies in 10 years, including big construction companies in London. But I never learned to type, and I wish I had,” she says.

“What really interested me was that the reason projects succeeded or failed spun on whether people had ‘bought into it’ and were willing to work together – it was all about motivation.”

At 28, she began university full-time, earning a first class honours degree in psychology at Coventry University. A postgraduate certificate in teaching and learning swiftly followed, then a diploma and masters degree in the same discipline, and a philosophy of science degree from Oxford University, where she has been a part-time lecturer in psychology since 2005.

The Age Research Centre at Coventry, where Ms Broughan is co-director with Malcolm Fisk, is newly launched: “One of our remits is around positive ageing, and the issues challenging older workers. In the UK, there is consistent evidence of serious age discrimination.

“If you look at the claims made in employment tribunals the biggest payouts are for age discrimination. Women face such discrimination far more than men do – and it is an international problem.

“A person’s socioeconomic status and the type of job they do” makes a difference, she says. “If you remove the retirement age and someone has spent their entire life driving a forklift truck or stacking shelves, you are taking away something they really look forward to – retirement. That is why I am an advocate of lifelong learning and being able to regain control of your life and your work,” she says.

She says there might be less age discrimination at senior management levels, but adds: “For companies the cost of replacing people with knowledge and skills is very high. Older workers stay with an organisation for much longer, and the cost of losing them is huge.

“Senior executive management in the UK tends to be intelligent and middle-class, and to favour people like themselves – but the most difficult situation within this group is for women also in that age bracket.”

She says of the Age Research Centre: “Our strength is engaging with industry and changing perceptions and we have relationships with Acas, the CBI and the TUC.” One of these relationships – with conciliation service Acas – led to a conference recently and the unveiling of the “age audit tool” that the two bodies developed in collaboration to allow an organisation to examine all areas of the business.

The brochure for the Age Research Centre says: “An estimated third of the (UK) population are aged over 50 and control around 80 per cent of its wealth. This represents a real market opportunity to business and we ignore their political influence at our peril.” “We’ve got to do something about this pretty soon as a country,” says Ms Broughan.

## **Secret CV**

### **Any mentors?**

No – not really

### **Your first big break ?**

No big break – but having the courage to give up a well-paid, full-time job when you are single and have a mortgage, to go back to university full-time was a big thing

### **What else might you have done?**

Anything that involves “making a difference to people’s lives” – I’m not motivated by money or materialistic possessions