



## **Support for those experiencing the ‘squeezed middle’ in academia: The story of a (*The A to D of*) *Becoming a Professor (BaP)***

*(The A to D of) Becoming a Professor (BaP)* is a personal and professional development experience commissioned by Dr Harriet Richmond of the Leadership and Management Development team at a Russell Group University in the UK, with design and delivery by Dr Jeremy Hinks of Alpamayo Coaching Ltd. This is the story of how *BaP* came into being, its content and intention, and how it was experienced by the first cohort of participants in 2025.

### **Unpacking the ‘A to D’**

Perhaps we should start with unpacking the ‘A to D’ part of the title as it may well have some relevance as to how this storytelling unfolds.

‘A’ stands for ‘already’. Already is a descriptor for all which is in existence right now. ‘B’ stands for ‘becoming’. Becoming is a descriptor for the intentions for the future, which might be expressed as a direction of travel, and/ or a destination. ‘C’ is for ‘choice’, reflecting the agency and decision making an individual or a collective have in bring about the transition from ‘A’ to ‘B’, from Already to Becoming. ‘D’ is for ‘difference’, which is all about difference in its broadest sense: between ‘A’ and ‘B’, between ideas, between people just to mention a few.

### **How *Becoming a Professor (BaP)* came into being**

First let’s take the ‘A to D’ as a framework for telling the origination story, before moving onto talking about its relevance to the programme content and participant experience.

The Leadership and Management Development team at this Russell Group University already had a wide range of development opportunities for staff at the university. Despite this there was a sense of a gap in the provision for mid-career researchers, most notably those on the cusp of applying for promotion to a Full Professor position. They also wanted to explore something different in the way of delivery to this community. Their vision was a programme with useful content yet with a priority on experiential learning, in an agile learning space, which could adapt to the different needs of each participant. Another feature they wanted to explore was ensuring design allowed for shared learning and peer-to-peer challenge and support, while also having some time for personal and personalised learning. You might call what they were after a ‘bespoke in the moment’ form of design and delivery.

For my part, I was already running my established coaching business (Alpamayo Coaching Ltd) which came into being after my own journey in research and academia. First, I was in medicinal chemistry research (for 13 years) and then in academia (25 years), the majority of which in leadership roles in the School of Chemistry at the University of Southampton. Much of my work is in Higher Education in the UK and beyond, through coaching and leadership development at more than 20 institutions, as well as with bodies like Advance HE and Vitae.

The nudge which caused our paths to cross back in 2024 came on the back of some work I had been doing for the University of Southampton over several years. This work was in the form of a programme I had designed and delivered with mixed groups of academic

researchers. The programme was called *Develop from Within: Self Awareness for Personal and Professional Development (DfW)*. These mixed groups came from different subject areas and levels of experience and then spent time with each other exploring their own unique behaviour preferences while learning from others as they reflected on theirs.

It was a different approach to the typical development opportunities in Higher Education and it has been well received over a number of years, during which time it had been hosted by the Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP) at the University of Southampton and delivered by me through Alpmayo Coaching.

Precisely how the ‘facilitating nudge’ was administered is lost in the mists of time! It’s consequence was a conversation between myself and Harriet Richmond in which I shared my story of *DfW*. Her interest was piqued by my description of *DfW* as a space for individual and group reflection based on an exploration of behaviour preferences which connected to the intention of self-awareness being a central aspect of participant’s experience. She was also drawn to how I described my style of facilitating the programme which is to hold the content lightly and to flex the content of the programme to meet the needs of participants during the session, without losing sight of the intention of the experience. For my part I was interested in the evolution of *DfW*, as even (or perhaps particularly) development programmes need to develop too!

As a result of our conversations, we agreed to collaborate on a new development programme, targeted at mid-career researchers. I can remember us talking about how *Develop from Within* might well not attract interest, so we scratched our heads for a second or two before I blurted out ‘what about, ‘*Becoming a Professor*’’. I remember a second or two where both of us felt ill at ease about the suggestion before realising

(a) it reflected the intention of the programme of supporting careers in transition

(b) it was relevant language for mid-career researchers and (c) it would attract attention! I persuaded Harriet of the value of adding ‘(*The A to D of*)’ at the beginning of the title as a means of introducing the terminology described earlier on, which I feel are important hooks for the thinking and feeling of participants. Despite committing to the title we both acknowledge reservations about whether it achieved the right balance of setting appropriate expectations and attracting the attention of a time-poor community of prospective participants.

### **Responses to the query, ‘what do you want from BaP?’**

- I did a similar course/activity at start of my career, keen to see if anything different.
- Sharing of experiences on becoming a professor
- Support/motivation/momentum to complete and submit a successful Uni application form for the next cycle
- Initially and most basically: I would like help with becoming a professor! But in more detail - a chance to understand how my strengths and weaknesses are affecting my career progression
- Some help on what on earth we can do to bolster our applications and some advice on how to make a specialist role understandable to a general audience
- I hope to gain a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, and some tools for addressing my weaknesses in ways that will help me professionally.
- Understanding the route to becoming a professor when you are a little bit unorthodox in how you fit the boxes...
- I hope to get an added sense of confidence and “articulation” going forward preparing the prof. application

## **The content and intention of *BaP***

That's the story of how we brought together our different versions of what we each had 'already', leading to us making the choice for *Develop from Within* to become *(The A to D of) Becoming a Professor*. How then do 'already', 'becoming', 'choice', and 'difference' feature in the programme?

First of all, here is a quick sense of the components of *BaP*. Participants are invited to complete an online behaviour preference evaluation called Lumina Spark, the responses to which underwrite a bespoke Spark Portrait for each of them. With this information in hand our participants come together for the first of two four-hour group sessions (delivered virtually in the current model to support accessibility). These group sessions are then followed by three one-hour individual coaching sessions for each person.

Broadly speaking the group sessions particularly focus on the behaviour preferences for each individual, which I think of as their 'already'. The Spark Portraits are used as the prompt conversation rather than in any way suggesting them to be the source of truth. Each individual has the opportunity to explore behaviours and, at a depth and level of sharing which is comfortable to them, the more complex areas of values, beliefs, biases, habits, and the context-influenced variability in relation to them. All this shows up similarities and 'differences' within and between those involved, and there is the opportunity to reflect on the 'choice' that initiate behaviours, or which arise as a result of enacting them.

The first group session involves a framework of content to support understanding of the Lumina Spark model. The session is threaded with conversations with and between participants to support the necessary level of understanding to support productive introspection and sharing.

In the two-week gap between the first and second group session everyone is asked to notice their own behaviour in action, the consequences of them on other people, and where their choices/habits move them forward and where they hold them back. The second group session is more dialogue driven informed by the observations they have made. Learning arises through sharing with each other, both as provider and recipient. Having the non-judgemental attention of your peers as you speak your thoughts and feelings on 'what makes you tick' is a valuable part of the *BaP* experience. It's another manifestation of the value of the awareness of 'difference' across the group.

The individual coaching sessions followed, scheduled at times and frequencies to suit each person, once again delivered through virtual connection. A shift in moving to one to one sessions presents the opportunity for more personal exploration given the confidentiality of each coaching partnership. There was also a change in dynamic between myself and each participant in these one-to-one interactions. Even though our relationships benefitted from the prior knowledge we had of each other from the *BaP* group sessions there was careful contracting required to support trust in each relationship, and to properly manage each person's sense of the process and purpose of coaching. The much greater experience researchers have of mentoring, as beneficiary and provider, tends to translate into an expectation of being given advice. Sometimes, being exposed to the curiosity of a coach and the enquiry led approach can be a little unsettling!

The purpose of the individual coaching component of *BaP* was to offer a safe space for participants to share their thinking and feeling, particularly in relation to their 'becoming', including the possible transition to Full Professor. This was certainly a part of the narrative in all of the conversations! The coaching partnerships also touched on their choices, in unique

ways for each participant. How was their ‘already’ supporting or hindering them in their work? What needed to stay the same and what needed to be different? There was the opportunity in the coaching partnership to take a whole of life perspective too, contemplating the effective integration of work, play, and relationships during consideration of ‘becoming’.

### **The experience of *BaP*, informed by participant feedback**

First to the two group sessions. Immediately after completion the participants were asked to comment on how these two group sessions contributed to the intention of supporting them in their application to Full Professor. Their comments are below:

‘Jeremy Hinks was a great facilitator/coach. Plenty of online interaction. Brought out vulnerability and honesty in participants, which made it very valuable. I wish we could do this for entire depts!’

‘Better understanding of using my character traits to my advantage at work.’

‘Interesting and useful, but not what I expected. So far it has not helped my promotion ambitions as more focused on leadership.’

‘The sessions were great for reflecting on the type of person I am at work and how that may (or may not) be contributing to my successes and failures.’

‘Excellent course. Highly recommend it for all career stages. The best bit was meeting peers. The title may be tweaked ‘not for professor’ but ‘for X-promotion’ and targeted key career stages?’

‘There was little discussion of what is needed to become /get promoted to professor or how what we were discussing related to being a professor.’

‘It’s made me understand myself a bit more and why certain activities are more or less pleasurable/easy/stressful. Very helpful for constructing the shape of grants and research collaborations.’

The accuracy of the comment about there being ‘little discussion about what is needed to become a professor’ is a factor for consideration whether appropriate expectations are being set in the way the *BaP* is being shared with prospective participants. The majority of the comments showed value in talking about what lies beneath professional behaviours and an implied ability to extrapolate this towards thinking about career progression.

Comments about the group sessions collected at the end of the whole *BaP* experience are shared below, revealing a sense of how *BaP* might be construed as a leadership course which, despite not being labelled as such, makes sense to me given the leadership responsibilities of those *BaP* is targeted at. The points of difference noted below appears to relate to the ‘bespoke in the moment’ intention being experienced by participants through the intentional dialogues which are regular parts of *BaP*.

‘The emphasis on individual and peer feedback, as well as the coaching have made this different from other leadership courses that I have been on. It dovetailed nicely with the Advance HE Aurora course, which focused on more generalised advise and networking.’

‘The group component of “(The A to D of) Becoming a Professor”, including the pre-assessment and feedback, provided a great opportunity to use alternative frameworks, concepts and ideas to evaluate how you see yourself in the workplace. There was a “take-it-or-leave-it” approach to the ideas presented, in that there was no compulsion to use an idea if for whatever reason you did it did not work for you.’

Experience is all very well but what about the action(s) participants intended to take. They were each asked about this at the end of the group sessions and their responses are shared here. Their intentions suggest discussing their behaviours with their peers was valuable to them, and the potential benefits of doing so for career progression are implicit throughout, and made explicit in one response.

- Encourage others to do the course, and be a bit more ‘sociable’ lol
- Consider more when I am overextending (both positively and negatively).
- Think about whether the way I behave at work aligns with my values, and how to close the gap between the two where there is one
- Think about my overextensions a bit more, and try and leverage my underlying strengths a bit more
- Think about how to tell my promotion story in a way that best reflects my values.
- Think about how to use my strengths effectively and manage my weaknesses.

Feedback in relation to the 1-2-1 coaching is harder to obtain given the confidential nature of the conversations. What was clear throughout the coaching, and evident in some of the feedback, is that participants did not know what to expect from coaching. No-one had experience of it, instead being familiar with traditional content led training and development conversations in formal appraisal situations, or in conversations with colleagues acting more as mentors. Their uncertainty, despite the best efforts of the advance information, aligns with a comment made to me in the recent past by an academic client, already an experienced Professor, who said of coaching, ‘Having conversations about how I do things and thinking about my style is really important, and they simply don’t happen in the support framework such as is available to Professorial staff’.

My own experience of the coaching partnerships was one of difference. Each client approached the coaching in their own unique way including how they navigated the uncertainty of what coaching was all about. Co-creation of trust with each of them took a different path and the direction of each conversation, once the ‘trust threshold’ had been met, was determined their open-ness to exploration and what they wanted to bring to coaching. Each partnership did reach the point where the participant took an actual or metaphorical deep breath and decided to talk about what really mattered to them. Conversations navigated professional development, personal journeys, and their relationship with key people and experiences in their past and present.

I had the impression it was the opportunity to have a holistic conversation which surprised them, yet once understood each coachee engaged with a level of disclosure which was comfortable to them. Feedback which illustrates a critical-to-success aspect of *BaP* is captured in the phrase ‘you get back what you put in’. The reason for putting the group sessions first in the programme is make this reality plain in the discussions the group engage in. As well as being very useful in their own right they prepare the ground for 1-2-1 coaching by beginning the process of trust building and by encouraging everyone to contribute. In fact, experiences from the group sessions, and the interpretation of their Lumina Spark Portraits

occasionally surfaced in the 1-2-1 conversations, making real the connectivity between all parts of *BaP*.

‘The 1-2-1 coaching is a distinct feature of “(The A to D of) Becoming a Professor” and was part of what attracted me to the course. I have been fortunate to have had good supervisors and line managers over the years who have provided time to discuss career options. However, Jeremy’s coaching provides a more neutral context in which to explore reflections on past and future career decisions. Jeremy takes a non-judgemental approach in his questioning, while providing you with enough stimulus to reflect on the matter(s) in hand.

‘The coaching was focused on how you go about your business in the workplace, giving you an opportunity to explore both your means and ends. Having time to reflect on your own practices and goals was very helpful in identifying – and reaffirming – what I want to achieve at work.’

‘I would say that you get back what you put in, so you really do need to put the time aside to focus on this. But that was one of the positives for me, in that having the coaching sessions enabled me to move my development up my priority list. I’ve also reflected on my strengths and weaknesses as a leader. I have started to implement strategies and techniques discussed in the coaching sessions. I have realised that taking time out for my development is just as important as supporting colleagues in theirs, which seems obvious now I write it down!’

### **What’s next for *Becoming a Professor*?**

The feedback above and the recommendations below are indicators of the positivity with which the programme has been received. On the basis of this *BaP* will be offered again in 2026 and we have decided to keep the title the same! Our early reservations about it remain, yet *The A to D of Becoming a Professor* fits the bill in helping target the programme to the appropriate constituency, it’s deliberately attention grabbing, and it does capture the intent of supporting mid-career researchers as they consider their promotion to Full Professor, and the leadership expectations which come with this transition. We will review the up-front programme information and improve the sense of how *BaP* fits into other existing developmental support there is around the process of promotion. To help with this we also envisage a final group session following on from the 1-2-1 coaching, which will also create an opportunity to share learning and peer to peer support for next steps.

‘I have found that I returned to ideas and discussions from the course and coaching in the months afterwards to reflect on any decisions I need to make, especially when they might affect my career direction. I would therefore suggest that the course is a starting point for reflecting upon your career and that provides you with some helpful ways to think about those issues differently than you had previously.’

‘I would recommend this to colleagues who wanted to take time to seriously think about their career development. As with any reflective work, it is something that you will get more out of, if you are prepared to put some work into it.’

‘I would describe this as a course primarily as a leadership journey, rather than a tool to enable promotion to professor. I would recommend it to colleagues looking to explore their leadership style, possibly at the start of their promotion journey and are looking to assess their strengths, weakness, values and communication style.’