CHAPTER 3

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GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES IN AN AGE
OF UNCERTAINTY

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a changing world; that much is a commonplace. But, in the present context, there are two further points that can be made immediately. Firstly, the range of the changes confronting the world and those who live in it are surely not always appreciated. Secondly, the working out of the implications of change for higher education is still a task that is largely before us. By addressing both of these challenges, we shall necessarily come to a more informed appreciation as to what ‘graduateness’ might mean in the twenty-first century and also gain some further insights into lifelong learning as a personal and social project.

2. A WORLD OF CHANGE

The world has been destabilized in numerous ways. Technologies, systems, institutions, languages and social practices change not just daily but with ever-increasing rapidity. One manifestation of these changes lies in dictionaries: compilers agonize over what is to be included, as new idioms arise, and know that any such publication is out of date as it is published. For many, this is a ‘runaway world’, in which traditions are being ‘disembedded’ and in which our ethical frameworks are failing to keep pace with the challenges that our technologies – in medicine, in surveillance techniques – are presenting to us (Giddens 1992, 2002). We hardly know how to live in such a world, it seems, except through retreating into ourselves, into our own projects. We go ‘bowling alone’ (Putnam 2000) in an increasingly individualized society.
Some of these readings can be and surely are overdone. While there are signs of the weakening of cultural ties, there are also signs of strengthening of such ties: communities seem often determined to reassert their sense of themselves in themselves, whether on a very local or a regional or a national level. Some regional languages revivify even as others threaten to disappear. Considerable efforts are invested in order to try to place some new technologies, at least, under some kind of rational and even ethical control. At the same time, the ideas of ‘MacDonaldization’ and ‘globalization’ are testimony to a potential emergence of world-wide cultural identities (Ritzer 1997). So the theme of ‘runawayness’ should not beguile us; it should not runaway with us. Nevertheless, I believe that we are into a new world order in which a vocabulary of change has a particular resonance.

We may term this world order a world of complexity. In itself, however, to invoke ‘complexity’ is a crude move and on two accounts. Firstly, complexity itself comes in all manner of forms, for example, as between systems complexity and ethical complexity, between statistical complexity and emotional complexity. Such complexities can be extended in range very considerably indeed. Secondly, complexity can all too easily simply convey a sense, however justified, of an external environment and, in the process, fail to indicate the internal challenges, as it were, to human beings of living amid complexity. Daily, single situations of the kinds that graduates face in professional life, present a range of complexities in themselves – in systems, in interpersonal relationships, in ethical matters, in roles and responsibilities. If the first consideration points us towards a horizontal sense of an unfolding range of complexities in extenso, the second consideration points us towards a vertical sense of complexity. Here, in this latter manifestation of complexity, its challenges reach deeply into human beings, often in a submerged form, hidden from view and yet reeking its havoc, to appear as stress and even suicide.

An environment of radical uncertainty and complexity both brings about changes in human beings and calls for changes. The changes are at once substantive – new knowledges, new adaptations, new skills – and superstructural. By superstructural, I mean change in human being as such: new dispositions, new qualities, new forms of being in the world. The superstructural changes are much more important than the substantive changes. Indeed, it is only by there being changes in human being as such that new knowledges and new skills are going to be acquired and, then, put to use.

Human beings won’t, for example, take the time and trouble to learn a second language on top of a busy professional and home life unless they have already