

Is there a Protestant Brain Drain from Northern Ireland?

Dirk Schubotz

Introduction

One of the more recent terms introduced in the arena of political discourse in Northern Ireland is that of the ‘brain drain’. In a way, the timing of this is paradoxical since Northern Ireland, for the first time, is actually experiencing population growth due to inward migration, so one could argue that it is hardly appropriate to describe what is happening as a ‘brain *drain*’. As a result of the failure of the UK government to put in place reasonably reliable means of recording inward and outward migration, we have no means of telling exactly how many people have moved to Northern Ireland in recent years and if they are planning to stay. However, best estimations¹ assume a figure in the region of 15,000 since 2004 – approximately 2,500 each year. Whilst the arrival of working migrants since the extension of the EU contributed most to the increase in the population, Bell, Jarman and Lefebvre showed that even prior to 2004, migrants from Eastern Europe were in the majority among new arrivals in Northern Ireland.² Thus, if anything, we need to record the arrival of additional ‘brains’ in Northern Ireland rather than a ‘drain’. Coincidentally the new arrivals are mostly well educated, usually without a penny of Northern Ireland’s tax payers’ investment and whilst some work for little money in monotonous unskilled or semi-skilled occupations, others fill vacant posts in quite demanding professions, for example in health and social care to name but one area.

But of course this is not what the ‘brain drain’ argument is about. What is behind it is in fact the fear that Protestant high achievers, who have for some years now been more likely than their Catholic counterparts to go to Great Britain to study, may not return. Significant food for the ‘brain drain’ discussion is provided by the enrolment statistics from Northern Ireland universities. According to the latest available statistical Fact Sheet on the enrolment figures in institutions of higher education in Great Britain and

Northern Ireland³, 58 percent of the students from Northern Ireland who remain here to study are Catholic and just 37 percent are Protestant. On the other hand, among students from Northern Ireland who study at a higher education institution in Great Britain, 53 percent are Protestant and only 34 percent Catholic. In their *Statistical Bulletin Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education: Northern Ireland, 2004/05*, DELNI (2006) report that:

Of the 5,455 NI domiciled undergraduates who attained qualifications through full-time study at Higher Education institutions in NI and had data returned, 91% of those whose location of employment was known remained in NI, 5% went to GB and 3% went to RoI.

But, of the 1,995 NI domiciled undergraduates who attained qualifications through full-time study at Higher Education institutions in GB and had data returned, 36% of those whose location of employment was known returned to NI, 56% remained in GB and 4% went to RoI.⁴

To put it briefly, the DELNI Fact Sheets suggest that young people from Northern Ireland who leave to go to university in Britain are more likely to stay there after they completed their courses. One weakness of this data is that it does not give information on the duration of university graduates' stay in Britain. They may just stay for a year or two to gather some work experience before they return to Northern Ireland. However, the fact that currently Protestants are more likely to go and study in Great Britain gives these statistics a socio-religious and political dimension, which must obviously interest the Unionist parties in Northern Ireland.

Not surprisingly the party that introduced the idea of the 'brain drain' in the political arena is the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the very party that more than any other party represents the interests of the Protestant middle class in Northern Ireland. The UUP presents a number of papers addressing 'brain drain' to Britain from Northern Irish School leavers.⁵ The party is careful not to call it a 'Protestant' brain drain, but that is in effect what they are worried about. In their argument they rely on DELNI statistics and a report produced by Bob Osborn and colleagues for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in 2006. Statistics show that 55 percent of Queen's University students and 60 percent of University of Ulster students are Catholic.⁶

In the next few paragraphs I will attempt to address this question of a 'brain drain' from Northern Ireland. I will do this by looking at the results of the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey and by putting these into context with the DELNI statistics of the destination of school leavers from Northern Ireland

and the destination of Northern Irish university graduates. I will examine whether or not young people from Northern Ireland in general are planning to leave and not come back, as the 'brain drain' argument implies. I will then discuss whether Protestants are indeed more likely to do so than Catholics, and, again, whether among Protestants educational high achievers are the most likely group to turn their backs on the country in which they grew up.

Methodology

The YLT survey is an annual Northern Ireland-wide postal survey of 16-year olds. A random sample is drawn from the Child Benefit Register – namely, everyone who turns 16 in February of the survey year is invited to complete the YLT questionnaire. The current article relates to the two surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006. In 2005, the response rate of the YLT survey was 40 percent, with 783 16-year olds completing the survey. The following year the response rate was 39 percent, with 741 received responses. Most respondents (approximately 95%) complete the paper questionnaire that is posted to their home addresses, but some 16-year olds also take part in the survey online or via the phone. YLT asks a range of social and political and background questions each year. These questions vary from year to year although some core questions on community relations have been asked repeatedly since the survey has been undertaken in its new format in 2003. Three questions on respondents' intentions to leave Northern Ireland, their reason to do so and to come back or not were asked in 2005 and 2006. Namely, these three questions were:

1. Thinking about the future, do you think that you yourself will stay in Northern Ireland, or do you think that you will leave at some point?
 - Stay
 - Leave
 - Don't know
 - Other
 - (Please say what) _____

Those who said they would leave were then asked further:

2. Why do you think that you will leave? (Please tick all boxes that apply.)
 - Better job prospects elsewhere
 - Because of the Troubles
 - To seek a better future in general

- Because of a relationship
 - To go to college/university
 - Other (Please say what) _____
 - Don't know
3. And do you think that you would ever come back to live?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know

For this article I merged the responses of 2005 and 2006. The findings in this article are therefore based on 1,526 responses. I checked carefully whether there were any significant differences between the two years, but as expected there were not; if there had been arguably they would have been based on chance rather than a 'trend'.

Since the questions in YLT are asked of 16-year olds, the data only provide statistics of young people's *intentions* to leave Northern Ireland and to come back, rather than information on the *actual* migration flow. On the other hand, current DELNI statistics on actual migration are necessarily inconclusive in relation to the prediction of future migration. A number of factors influencing migration and personal individual circumstances are difficult to predict. For young people who intend to study, whether or not they leave Northern Ireland to attend a university in Britain or elsewhere may significantly depend on their A-level grades and on entry criteria set by their chosen universities, which can also change. Some young people may choose to leave Northern Ireland because they think this is a good thing to do for their personal development and maturity *regardless* of their grades; others may be forced to leave or stay because they want to follow a certain career path *because* of their grades.

Furthermore, DELNI statistics only relate to those who leave Northern Ireland to further their educational career, but do not capture information of young people who leave for other than educational reasons. As well as that, DELNI only collects information on what graduates do immediately after completing their university courses. The YLT survey has advantages here. What the YLT data can do well is to present a mindset and predisposition of 16-year olds in relation to outward migration because the questions asked are not just limited to migration due to educational advancements. Thus, YLT complements the actual migration statistics from DELNI to some extent, and together the data can usefully contribute to the debate of 'brain drain'.

Results

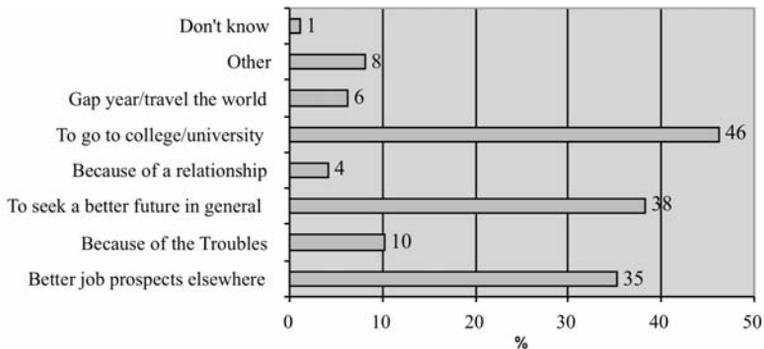
One third (33%) of all YLT respondents in 2005 and 2006 said that they planned to stay in Northern Ireland. Thirty nine percent said they would leave. This means that 16-year olds in both survey years were more likely to say that they would leave Northern Ireland than to say that they will stay. However the proportion of unsure respondents was also significant (25%).

The three main reasons given by 16-year olds for their intentions to leave Northern Ireland were:

1. To go to college/university
2. To seek a better future in general
3. Better job prospect elsewhere.

Only around one in ten respondents said they would leave Northern Ireland because of the Northern Ireland conflict – or ‘the Troubles’ as the conflict is colloquially called (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Why do you think that you will leave?



Whilst a substantial proportion of 16-year olds do indeed consider leaving Northern Ireland more than half (52%) of the respondents planning to leave said they would come back, and nearly four in ten respondents (38%) had not made up their minds and were not sure whether they would come back or not. Only seven percent said they would not come back. This figure corresponds very well with DELNI’s statistics (2006) on university graduates’ destinations. In terms of the ‘brain drain’ argument, if all those respondents who said they did not know whether they would come back to Northern Ireland or not also stayed away, Northern Ireland would ‘lose’ about one third of its young people due to outward migration, but this scenario can be ruled out as unlikely.

So, who are the respondents that plan to go away and say that they won't come back?

The 'brain drain' argument is very much linked to the debate on how community relations in Northern Ireland have developed since the Northern Ireland peace process. Protestants have been shown to be less satisfied than Catholics with the peace process in Northern Ireland. Whilst the support for the Good Friday agreement remained strong among Catholics, when questioned the majority of Protestants would now vote against the Agreement. If the Good Friday Agreement had been held again in 2003, only 37 percent of Protestants, but 84 percent of Catholics would have voted 'yes'.⁷ In the most recent Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey, respondents were asked how they would vote in 2007 if a referendum on the St Andrew's Agreement were held? Again the results showed that 54 percent of Catholics but only 39 percent of Protestants would vote 'yes'.⁸ Among Protestants both adults and young people are also less optimistic about the future of community relations than their Catholic counterparts are.⁹ The strengthening of the DUP vote in recent elections on the one hand and the weakening of the UUP on the other can be seen as a clear indicator for the shift of opinion among Protestants. In the context with the NILT and YLT findings on Protestant disillusionment with the Northern Ireland peace process, the DELNI (2004, 2006) statistics may indeed lead to the conclusion that Northern Ireland is slowly running out of Protestants – the very people for whom the country was created in the first place. But do the YLT statistics on 16-year olds' intentions to leave Northern Ireland further this argument?

Tables 1-3 look at the hypotheses of a Protestant 'brain drain'. Table 1 shows that YLT respondents differ significantly in their thoughts on whether they would leave Northern Ireland or not ($p=0.000$). However, Protestants were actually much more likely to say that they would *stay* in Northern Ireland than Catholics. The 16-year olds that were most likely to say that they will leave the country were the ones who said they had no religion. In fact, over half (51%) of non-religious respondents gave this response. Considering how the Northern Irish society is set up, in particular the religiously segregated school system – and this is where these 16-year olds have spent most of their lifetime – this makes perfect sense.

Table 1: Do you think that you yourself will stay in Northern Ireland, or do you think that you will leave at some point?

	%		
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion
Stay	31	39	28
Leave	41	35	51
Don't know	28	25	20

Table 2 investigates the main reasons why YLT respondents said they would be leaving. There are three key findings:

1. Protestants, Catholics and respondents with no religion only significantly differ ($p=0.016$) in relation to leaving Northern Ireland in order to attend college or university. In this respect, Catholics were much less likely to say than their Protestant and non-religious counterparts that they would leave, but it is noteworthy again that those with no religion were the most likely group to say they would leave (58%). Nonetheless, here YLT confirms the statistical records from DELNI and would suggest that the current trend of Protestants being more likely to study in Great Britain, whilst Catholics are more likely to study in Northern Ireland, may continue.
2. Catholics were *most* likely to say they would leave to find better job prospect elsewhere.
3. With regard to the Northern Ireland conflict, respondents who were neither Catholic nor Protestant appear most affected by the 'Troubles' and were twice as likely as Catholics and much more likely than Protestants to say they will leave Northern Ireland because of this.

Table 2: Why do you think that you will leave?

	%		
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion
Better job prospect elsewhere	38	31	35
Because of the Troubles	8	9	16
To seek a better future in general	38	36	42
Because of a relationship	2	7	4
To go to college/university*	40	52	58
Other	7	7	12
Don't know	2	<1	<1
Gap year/traveling	8	4	6

*Significant at 0.05 level

Table 3 shows that there is no difference between Protestants and Catholics in terms of their intentions to come back to Northern Ireland. However, non-religious respondents were significantly less likely ($p=0.029$) to say they would come back and nearly twice as likely as Catholics and Protestants to say they would *not* come back.

Table 3: Do you think you would ever come back to live?

	%		
	Catholic	Protestant	No religion
Yes	58	55	46
No	6	6	11
Don't know	37	38	43

Table 4 summarises the results of the 2005 and 2006 YLT surveys in relation to respondents' intentions to leave Northern Ireland and not come back across a number of categories. The Table shows that Catholics were slightly more likely to say that they would leave Northern Ireland than Protestants, but as already discussed above, respondents who were neither Protestants nor Catholics were the most likely to say that they would leave and not come back ($p=0.000$).

Another way of looking at the argument of a Protestant 'brain drain' is by national identity. This is because not all respondents said they had a religious identity, but non-religious respondents who said they were part of the Protestant community still said, in their majority, they were British (or Ulster), whereas the vast majority of non-religious members of the Catholic community said they were Irish. Table 4 shows that in fact YLT respondents who said they were Irish (41%) were *more* likely than those who said they had a British (34%) or Ulster identity (36%) to say they would leave Northern Ireland. But again it is respondents that identified as Northern Irish (43%) or neither of these above four categories – ie. who identified as 'other' (55%) – that were most likely to say they intended to leave Northern Ireland. The common argument that those who say they have a Northern Irish identity are predominantly Protestants – whether they are religious or not – can only be partially confirmed by the YLT data. Thirty two percent of respondents who said they were part of the Protestant community also said they had a Northern Irish identity. This compares with just 17 percent of respondents who said they were part of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, but 41 percent of respondents who said they belonged to neither community. Seen from another

angle, less than half (46%) of respondents who said their national identity was Northern Irish were actually members of the Protestant community. This was also true for those who had an ‘other’ national identity; only 36 percent of this group felt part of the Protestant community.

Table 4: Respondents saying they will leave Northern Ireland and not come back

		%	
		Leave	Not come back ¹
Religion	Catholic	41	6
	Protestant	35	6
	No religion	51	11
National Identity	Irish	41	8
	British	34	6
	Ulster	36	9 ²
	Northern Irish	43	5
	Other	55	19 ³
School Type	Grammar	48	6
	Secondary	32	7
	Planned integrated	43	10
How well off is your family financially?	Well off	46	6
	Average	38	7
	Not well off	39	10
Gender	Male	36	6
	Female	43	8
Sexual attraction	Opposite sex attracted	38	5
	Same-sex attracted	62	20

1 Percentage of respondents saying they will leave

2 Note small cell count: n=4

3 Note small cell count: n=8

In terms of school background, unsurprisingly, Table 4 shows that Grammar School students were more likely to say they would leave Northern Ireland than non-Grammar School students; however, the table also shows that students from planned integrated schools were almost as likely to say they would leave and *most* likely to say *not* to come back.

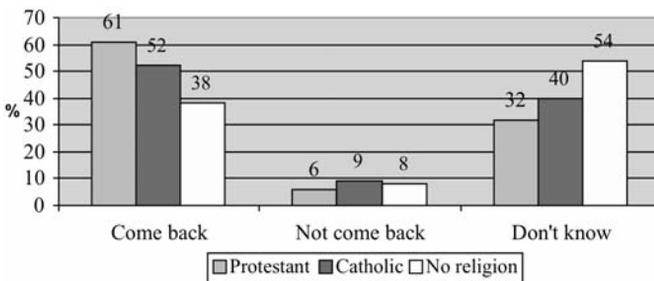
A similar point can be made about the financial background of respondents. As could be expected, there is a substantial overlap between Grammar School attendance and financial background of respondents with 61 percent of respondents from well-off backgrounds attending Grammar schools compared to just 31 percent from not well-off families. It could be expected that Grammar School students from well-off families would be most likely to be able to afford to live away and study away from home. Interestingly though, respondents from not-well-off families were most likely to say they would *not* come back, which again does little to support the ‘brain drain’ argument that it is the ‘most talented’ young people from Ulster who migrate to Britain for good. (Aside from the fact that this concept of the ‘most talented’ in itself is highly judgemental and value-laden.)

But how about respondents who said they will go away to study?

The brain drain argument largely relies on the DELNI figures of full-time students’ destination of employment after graduation. So, are middle or upper class Protestants indeed less likely to say they would come back to Northern Ireland to live? In order to test this, I selected all respondents who said they would leave Northern Ireland to study elsewhere. The results in Figure 2 would suggest that Protestants among respondents who said they would leave Northern Ireland to go to university or college were actually *more* likely to say that they would come back here to live than Catholics, but as before, those who were *neither* Protestant nor Catholic were *least* likely to say they would return (38%) and *most* uncertain whether they would come back or not (54%).

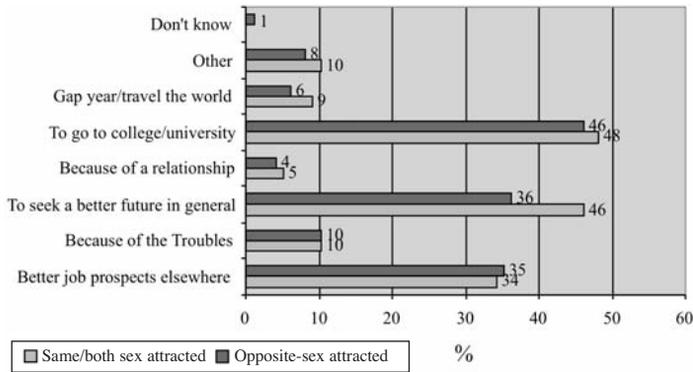
In terms of gender, females appear slightly more likely to intend to move from Northern Ireland; statistically, however, this difference was not significant.

Figure 2: Do Respondents that want to leave NI to study at college or university intend to come back?



The most significant difference ($p=0.000$) existed in terms of sexual orientation/attraction. YLT asked respondents whether they had ever been sexually attracted to someone. A number of possible answer options were given ranging from exclusively heterosexual attraction to exclusively same-sex attraction. The results in Table 4 show that more than six in ten (62%) YLT respondents who said they were at least once (or more often) attracted to someone of the same sex intended to leave Northern Ireland compared to less than four in ten (38%) of those who had only ever been attracted to people from the opposite sex.

Figure 3: Why do you want to leave Northern Ireland? By respondents' sexual attraction



Same/both-sex attracted respondents were also four times as likely to say they would not come back as their counterparts. Those who had never been sexually attracted to anyone were excluded from this analysis. When these two groups are compared in relation to their reasons to leave Northern Ireland (Figure 3), the results show that they differ only significantly in one aspect: to seek a better future in general.

Conclusions

The evidence presented in this paper in relation to the perceived 'brain drain' from Northern Ireland is based on a representative sample of 16-year olds taken from the merged 2005 and 2006 YLT survey data. In my argument I relied predominantly on YLT respondents' intentions to leave Northern Ireland and their perception whether they would come back or not. However, where appropriate I compared these intentions with the figures provided by

DELNI about school leavers' destination and destination of Northern Ireland domiciled UK university students. As I demonstrated, the DELNI statistics matched the YLT statistics quite well in terms of 16-year olds' intentions to leave for educational reasons. However, I also argued that this data alone is not sufficient to support the 'brain drain' argument.

According to the YLT data, overall Protestants are actually *more* likely to stay in Northern Ireland than Catholics and also more likely to plan to come back if they do leave. This may not be immediately after the completion of their studies, and the lack of information on this is one of the central weaknesses of the DELNI statistics on which the 'brain drain' argument appears to rely almost exclusively. The key finding from YLT is that 16-year olds who do not fit in the segregated Protestant-Catholic landscape and who do not identify as Irish or British/Ulster are more inclined to leave the country. The proportion of 16-year olds willing to leave and not planning to come back was particularly high among respondents:

- who identified as Northern Irish;
- who had a national identity other than British, Ulster, Irish or Northern Irish;
- who were neither Catholic nor Protestant;
- who attended planned integrated schools; and,
- notably, who had been sexually attracted to a person of the same-sex.

I argue that these YLT statistics are evidence that Northern Ireland remains a divided society, in which those who do not feel they belong in either of two main socio-religious communities or 'Lager'¹⁰ are most likely to consider living elsewhere. In relation to sexual orientation and attraction I have extended this argument with some colleagues of mine elsewhere.¹¹ There we present evidence for consequences that a homophobic and heterologic society like Northern Ireland has severe implications for the mental health of non-heterosexual young people. So, if at all, then there is evidence for a 'brain drain' of those who are neither Protestant nor Catholic and who struggle with a Northern Irish culture that is still strongly dominated by religious conservatism.

This article of course would be incomplete without a few concluding words on a broader perspective that places the discussion in a British/Irish/European perspective:

Firstly, as I already stated in the introduction of this paper, a 'brain drain' discussion at times when Northern Ireland experiences population influx and growth seems somehow displaced as it is. Cynically, one could, secondly, add,

that the very parties that take the lead in this ‘brain drain’ discussion, ie the Unionist parties, are the ones that also make the point that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. So, from that angle, people from Northern Ireland moving to Britain to study do not really leave their country... In the same vein, this could explain why Catholics are more predisposed to study in (Northern) Ireland. In this context, even imagining discussions that a migration of students from Lyon to Paris, from Upsala to Stockholm or from Hanover to Berlin would constitute regional ‘brain drains’ seems somewhat absurd. Thirdly and finally, Northern Ireland is – with all respect – a small country, no matter if it is regarded as a part of the UK, an Irish region or something else. The opportunities for young people to develop either academically or professionally are therefore limited. It would be unnatural and counterproductive for Northern Ireland as a region to strive to educate all young people here, as Donaldson suggests in his UUP pamphlet.¹²

The German language has a saying, which translated into English says something like: ‘*Weltanschauung* (‘world-view’) derives from viewing the world’. Certainly from a European perspective, young people should be encouraged to view the world and study and live elsewhere for a time. The experiences they would bring back when they return – and most will return – would contribute greatly to an improvement in community relations, a broadening of horizons and, last but not least, eventually to economic and civil development in Northern Ireland and emancipation of its citizens. If the Northern Ireland government wanted to do young people from Northern Ireland a favour, my view is that they would encourage this rather than initiate discussions that are counterproductive to cultural and educational exchange, dishonest, and above all evidence for an unfortunate provincialism which is still evident in Northern Ireland politics.

Notes

- 1 NISRA 2006
- 2 Bell, Jarman and Lefebvre, 2004.
- 3 DELNI, 2003.
- 4 DELNI, 2006, p.2.
- 5 Notably UUP, 2007
- 6 DELNI, 2006.
- 7 McAllister, Hayes and Dowds, 2005.
- 8 NILT, 2006.
- 9 Schubotz and Devine, 2005.
- 10 Diamant, 1974.
- 11 McNamee, Schubotz and Lloyd, forthcoming.
- 12 UUP, 2007.

References

Bell, K., Jarman, N. and Lefebvre, T. (2004), 'Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland' in *Labour Market Bulletin No. 18*, Belfast, Department for Employment and Learning (DELNI)

DELNI (2006), *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education: Northern Ireland, 2004/05*. www.delni.gov.uk/dol_2004-2005.pdf [accessed 9 January 2008]

DELNI (2003), *Statistical Fact Sheet. Northern Ireland school leavers who entered institutions of higher education in Northern Ireland and Great Britain by religion - 2001/02* www.delni.gov.uk/8hereligion-2.pdf [accessed 9 January 2008]

Diamant, A. (1974), 'The Three Lager and the First Republic' in MacRea, K. (ed.), *Consociational Democracy*, pp150-156, Toronto, McLelland and Stewart.

McAllister, I. Hayes, B. C. and Dowds, L. (2005), *The Erosion of Consent: Protestant Disillusionment with the Agreement*, ARK Research Update 32. Available at: www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update32.pdf [accessed 9 January 2008]

McNamee, H., Schubotz, D. and Lloyd, K. (2008), 'Same sex attraction, homophobic bullying and mental health of young people in Northern Ireland' in *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11 (1), pp33-46.

NILT (2006). www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2006/Political_Attitudes/VOTESTA.html [accessed 9 January 2008]

Osborn, R., Smith, A. and Hayes, A. (2006), *Higher Education in Northern Ireland: A Report on Factors Associated with Participation and Migration, Report to OFMDFM*. Available at www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/highereducation.pdf [accessed 9 January 2008]

Schubotz, D. and Devine, P. (2005), 'What now? Exploring Community relations among 16-Year Olds in Northern Ireland' in *Shared Space* 1 (1), pp53-70, Belfast, Community Relations Council.

UUP (2007), *Donaldson calls for "Pro-Active, United Approach" to tackle Brain Drain of Ulster School-Leavers*. Available at: <http://uuptoday.org/newsroom/2007/02/16/donaldson-calls-for-pro-active-united-approach-to-tackle-brain-drain-of-ulster-school-leavers/> [Accessed 9 January 2008].

YLT (2005, 2006), *Young Life and Times surveys* [computer file]. ARK [distributor]: www.ark.ac.uk/ylt. [accessed 9 January 2008]