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In the UK, there has been growing concern about the number of young people NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and those ‘churning’ (Furlong 2006) between low paid, insecure apprenticeships and jobs, unpaid voluntary work, periods of unemployment, and never-ending training courses without clear employment opportunities in sight (MacDonald 2011). According to statistics, low qualifications are among the most important risk factors for unsuccessful labour market integration and becoming NEET (Mirza-Davies & Brown 2016). Therefore, a key aspect of the government strategy for reducing youth unemployment and NEET numbers has been the promotion of apprenticeships in order to equip young people with in-demand skills (Brockmann & Laurie 2016; Hogarth, Gambin & Hasluck 2012). Indeed, statistics show that apprenticeships have a high probability to lead to employment (Ryan & Lőrinc 2015). According to the 2011 Census results, 89.4% of 24-35 year olds who completed apprenticeships were employed - the second highest employment rate only after those qualified to degree level and above (90.5%). In order to increase uptake, the British Government has announced a target of 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020, with apprenticeships to be given the same legal treatment as degrees. Through the apprenticeship levy, the Government plans to raise over £3 billion a year by 2019-20, of which £2.5 billion will be spent on apprenticeships in England alone. This is the highest investment in real terms ever made for apprenticeships (Mirza-Davies 2016). However, there are still many questions to be answered regarding this learning pathway (Brockmann, Clarke & Winch 2010; Green 2015). In this paper, we draw on in-depth longitudinal qualitative research with young apprentices, tutors, employers and policy makers to explore several apprenticeship schemes across London. We consider the reasons why these young people choose to do apprenticeships despite the widespread concerns that still surround this type of training in the UK. We also examine some of the limitations and challenges of these programmes, based on the apprentices’ experiences and the accounts of their tutors and policy makers. These challenges include lack of information available to school leavers about apprenticeships, the low esteem of this learning pathway, financial limitations due to low pay for apprentices, low quality or uneven training in some programmes, and a vocational education system that many find difficult to navigate.

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