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AI SKILLS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INDUSTRY-ACADEMIA CO-CREATION

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Introduction

The CTLD (Connect to Learn Digital) programme is an industry-academia initiative that equips students with AI and digital skills through co-creation. It is a collaboration between Manchester Metropolitan University (ManMet Business School), Salesforce, and students, which equips students with industry-relevant skills while reshaping academic-industry partnerships. This essay reflects on CTLD's development, the role of co-creation, key challenges, and lessons learned.

Initially staff-led, CTLD emerged as a co-creative initiative within ManMet Business School's Operations, Technology, Events, and Hospitality Management (OTEHM) Department, focusing on postgraduate students. The vision was to provide digital skills, certifications, and career readiness strategies, but achieving this required navigating approvals, securing resources, and building partnerships.

Co-creation in higher-education institutions (HEI) extends beyond simple collaboration, emphasising shared decision-making, mutual accountability, and active stakeholder participation. Co-creation is rooted in interactional creation, where learning occurs through dynamic engagement between students, faculty, and external partners. CTLD emphasises that co-creation drives innovation in HEIs, requiring institutions to embrace more flexible, technology-enhanced learning environments.

Our understanding of co-creation is the process where multiple stakeholders actively shape the learning experience together, each bringing unique contributions to shape the learning framework itself. The distinction between collaboration and co-creation is particularly relevant in the evolving landscape of higher education-industry partnerships. While collaboration often implies working together towards a shared goal, co-creation takes it higher by ensuring joint ownership of the process, where all stakeholders actively shape the outcomes. CTLD actively engaged students in decision making at multiple stages, from refining the Salesforce AI certification learning pathways to shaping the programme's mentorship structure to students engaging with actual business challenges.

The Salesforce Partnership on Co-Creation

The CTLD programme exemplifies authentic learning through shared projects that require students to use digital tools (e.g., Salesforce, AI applications) to solve industry problems. This process highlights the importance of embedding experiential learning within curricula, ensuring that students develop both technical expertise and critical thinking skills.

Salesforce, a leading cloud-based customer relationship management (CRM) platform, is highly valued in the job market, with an estimated 18 million opportunities projected by 2028. Establishing a partnership with Salesforce was pivotal to CTLD's success. Initial

discussions with departmental heads, PG programme leaders and key Salesforce stakeholders, including the Vice President of Trailhead.com and the Talent Ecosystem EMEA, helped define the programme's scope. This led to engagement with the Salesforce Talent Alliance team, whose Academic Ambassador programme was adapted to align with CTLD's vision, reinforcing its emphasis on openness, flexibility, and shared goals.

With preliminary approval secured, the roadmap was shared with PG programme leaders in Project Management and Business Analytics, along with Salesforce teams. Together, we developed a tailored programme addressing ManMet's international student demographic, preparing them for the competitive global job market.

The promotion process included Moodle announcements, short lecture hall presentations, and a QR code registration system. The programme launched with an introductory session attended by 55 students, leading to the onboarding of 59 participants across two Master's programmes. The session, co-designed with ManMet alumni in Salesforce roles and Salesforce employees, resulted in 35% participation from Business Analytics students and 20% from Project Management.

During the introductory phase, we consistently emphasised that participation in the 9-month programme was entirely voluntary. Student enthusiasm was evident in feedback collected post-session:

The event is an eye opener to many opportunities to explore. (Student 1)

I gained good knowledge about the Salesforce ecosystem and how I can be a part of it. Really looking forward to this journey. (Student 2)

I would like to sign up and enrol for salesforce. (Student 3)

The PG-CTLD programme focused on AI learning, encouraging students to gain industry-recognised certification before graduation. Learning activities were virtual, combining self-paced modules and scheduled webinars. With no bandwidth constraints, all interested students could participate. Salesforce's contributions extended beyond expertise, providing AI certification vouchers worth \$2,000, six employee-led webinars, and an educational trip to Salesforce Tower in London. The university, in turn, offered collaboration tools and physical spaces for student engagement. As programme coordinator, I played a key role in ensuring these resources were effectively deployed to maximise student participation.

Mapping Stakeholder Contributions in the Co-Creation Process

CTLD positioned students as active co-creators in knowledge exchange, defining how learning resources were delivered, how mentorship was structured, and how real-world applications were incorporated. Table 1 maps out the contributions of each stakeholder across different domains:

Table 1 Mapping Stakeholder Contribution in Co-Creation

Stakeholder	Financial Contribution	Intellectual Contribution	Technological Contribution	Experiential Contribution
University	Funding, administrative support	Curriculum development, mentorship strategies	Learning platform integration	Student academic mentorship
Industry (Salesforce & Mentors)	Free certifications/ vouchers, workshops	AI & CRM expertise	Access to Salesforce Trailhead & industry use cases	Speaker engagement, real-world case studies
Students	N/A	Co-creation of learning pathways, alumni and peer mentoring	Engagement with AI tools, feedback on platform usability	Testing & feedback loops, contributing to real-world problem-solving projects

Co-Creating the Learning Experience

The CTLD programme was designed with a shared decision-making approach, ensuring that student input played a central role in shaping the learning experience. Through surveys, drop-in sessions, and informal conversations, students provided feedback that directly influenced programme structure. For instance, based on student recommendations, the AI component was prioritised earlier in the curriculum, and a flexible, modular approach to certification learning was introduced.

A key feature of co-creation was the integration of ManMet alumni with Salesforce expertise, enabling peer-to-peer learning. This approach provided students with relatable role models and a supportive environment for sharing insights. To ensure continuity, CTLD introduced a mentorship ladder, where previous cohorts guided new students, encouraging knowledge transfer and peer-led learning.

Students also expressed the need for more flexible access to industry-expert Q&A sessions. In response, the engagement model shifted from solely live sessions to an asynchronous format via LinkedIn and the Salesforce trailblazer community group, Scholars Hub UK. This adaptation increased accessibility, allowing students to connect with industry professionals at their convenience, overcoming time zone and scheduling constraints. It also reflects a broader trend in digital learning, where asynchronous engagement enhances inclusivity and flexibility.

As the programme coordinator, I (Opeoluwa) focus on creating opportunities for practical learning, industry engagement, and integrating technology-driven platforms that support equitable participation. The programme leveraged Salesforce's Trailhead Learning Management System (LMS), where learning topics were broken into modules and units, each with quizzes or hands-on challenges. Students earned digital badges upon completion, which could be showcased on LinkedIn or personal websites, which is an industry-relevant feature

reinforcing career readiness. To encourage engagement, a leaderboard was introduced and shared with students via Teams, encouraging healthy competition and motivating students to maintain a top ranking.

The continuous feedback loop with students positioned them as co-designers of their own learning journey. Many highlighted how the programme bridged the gap between theory and practical application, providing clarity on career paths: “Initially, I didn’t have any direction to the course I’m actually taking, but PG Connect is really an eye-opener for me, and I’m glad I came across Salesforce.” Others highlighted the continuous training and tailored support, with one participant saying, “PG Connect Digital has created a one-of-a-kind platform to support students,” while another shared that “PG Connect has really contributed to me in many ways; when we started this programme, I was lost. Now, I have confidence in myself through the knowledge acquired.”

The programme’s impact on practical skills was also emphasised, with students gaining valuable expertise in areas like business analysis and project management. One student mentioned: “I wasn’t really taught the basics of business analysis, but with this PG Connect, I have been able to learn how to apply the skills needed for a business analyst.” Another noted: “I never had an understanding of working with projects, but with this opportunity, I had an experience to work on projects.” Finally, the introduction of Salesforce was praised as a transformative aspect of the programme, with one student stating, “Introducing Salesforce was the icing on the cake... it really helped bring the understanding home.” These insights reflect the programme’s adaptive approach, responding to student feedback and continuously evolving to meet their needs and equip them with essential skills for the future.

Another mentor from the first cohort reinforced the value of this approach in a post shared with the new cohort of students:

We used our weekends not just to review what we’d learned but also to share our progress and insights with one another. I encourage each of you to do the same—share your progress here in the group and consider posting about it on LinkedIn. Putting yourself out there now can open doors to future opportunities.

To further support engagement, I (Opeoluwa) launched a Teams poll to assess students’ learning progress:

Have you started learning with the Connect to Learn Digital resources on Trailhead?"
Poll Options:
Yes, I’ve started and made good progress!
Yes, but I’m still getting used to it.
Not yet, but I plan to start soon!
Not yet, and I need help getting started.

This approach enabled timely intervention and support where needed.

To ensure a sense of community and mitigate the challenges inherent in self-paced learning, we implemented interactive elements like monthly webinars led by Salesforce experts. These webinars provided technical support, career insights and real-time Q&A opportunities. Additionally, peer-learning groups further enhanced engagement, with four of the six top-ranking students belonging to such groups. Recognising the self-paced nature of the

programme, I (Opeoluwa) maintained regular check-ins to ensure students stayed on track, reinforcing a culture of accountability and continuous learning.

Challenges in Co-Creation

While the programme achieved notable successes, the co-creation journey was not without challenges, highlighting the complexity of managing multiple stakeholders in a co-creation environment. Unlike traditional curriculum design, where the university holds authority, co-creation inherently involves power sharing. This process was not without tensions, which included the industry-academia expectation gap. It is not surprising that industry partners often prioritise job readiness and certification, while universities emphasise broader critical thinking skills. Balancing these priorities required careful negotiation to ensure CTLD did not become merely a technical training programme but remained embedded in academic rigour. Another challenge was the sustainability of the co-creation process, especially when students graduate, their involvement often diminishes. To mitigate this, a mentorship ladder was introduced, where previous cohorts act as peer mentors for new students, ensuring knowledge transfer beyond individual cohorts. Acting as mentors would further develop leadership and communication skills, which are valuable and transferable skills.

The Salesforce LMS comes with its own unique challenge; the extensive pool of information available can easily overwhelm learners if they are not guided on a clear path. Without focus, it is easy to get lost navigating through various trails. To mitigate this challenge, I (Opeoluwa) provided a demo during the onboarding session to show how to complete a trail effectively. As the programme coordinator at the University, I (Opeoluwa) have implemented additional support measures, including an open-door policy for in-person or virtual assistance, the involvement of mentors who are active in the programme's MS Teams channel, and weekly drop-in sessions available throughout the programme to address any learner challenges.

One notable difference between the first cohort and the current one is the removal of the ranking-based rewards and vouchers for certification, which initially served as incentives for participation. In the first iteration, students were required to achieve Ranger status before qualifying for certification vouchers. However, in later cohorts, this requirement was removed as the programme aligned with Salesforce's 'AI for All' initiative, which provided free AI certification. While this expanded access, it also introduced time sensitive constraints, as students had to complete the certification before it was phased out and replaced with a new AI programme. Despite this, elements of healthy competition remained, with leaderboard continuing to drive engagement, alongside mentorship structures and peer study groups.

The self-paced learning model could have its flaws, such as a lack of motivation, where some students may struggle to stay engaged without consistent external encouragement; isolation, as CTLD is designed as a self-paced and virtual programme, it might take extra determination for peer interaction and collaboration; and limited clarity on student's self-discipline. These challenges re-emphasise the need for a robust support system. In mitigating these issues, we scheduled regular weekly drop-in clinics to provide technical support for students, gather feedback, and answer questions. I created opportunities for students to connect with each other more via the MS Teams, and this naturally led to them forming study groups beyond the general Teams channel discussion.

Another challenge was how we could balance diverse stakeholder expectations. Decisions often required careful negotiation and thoughtful collaboration to align with the university's priorities, Salesforce's objectives and student needs. To address this, some of the mechanisms we deployed were regular review meetings amongst all stakeholders, transparent communications and consistent feedback collations and actions. These strategies helped us ensure that all voices were heard, concerns were addressed promptly, and the programme remained focused on delivering value to every stakeholder.

Impact and Lessons Learnt

The programme provided us with valuable insights and lessons that shaped our understanding of co-creation. By its second year, CTLD had expanded to include undergraduate final year students and evolved into a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) programme, facilitating cross-cultural collaboration. This rebranding from PG-CTLD to CTLD reflected the programme's widening influence and international impact. While still in its early stages, CTLD has recently entered into a collaboration with The Bells University of Technology in Nigeria, with plans to integrate international perspectives into the co-creation process. Students from both institutions will soon collaborate on solving real-world business problems, leveraging their diverse cultural backgrounds to co-create solutions that are globally relevant.

The programme's success extended beyond ManMet, gaining notable recognition within Salesforce. CTLD was spotlighted during an internal Salesforce Academic Ambassador call, where I (Opeoluwa) was invited to co-present the programme as a standout example of impactful industry-academia co-creation. This recognition highlights the active role both the institution and industry partners played in shaping the programme. Reflecting on the impact, the Salesforce Program Analyst and Operations Manager remarked:

... it's so incredible to see our ManMet trailblazers reach new highs everyday; they're on a roll. This won't be possible without all of the valuable contributors to the programme (shoutout to all of the supporters!), BOLDforce, Ope herself as the visionary academic that she is and certainly not possible without you Tunde - thanks for partnering with me on this, here's to more of these engagements!

This acknowledgment reinforced CTLD's role as a trailblazer in co-creating an industry-aligned learning experience. Inspired by this success, Salesforce team members in Italy have proposed mirroring the model with other universities, adapting it to their regional context and student needs. This replication demonstrates the scalability and adaptability of the CTLD framework, showcasing its potential as a blueprint for similar initiatives worldwide, as can already be seen with The Bells University of Technology.

Another critical element of the programme is where students work on real business challenges, test solutions, and receive feedback from industry mentors. Students document their insights through video diaries, creating digital portfolios that can be shared with the industry. This process ensures that students not only absorb knowledge from industry mentors but also challenge existing business practices with fresh perspectives, contributing to the co-creation of new ideas.

The success of CTLD was not just in the certifications earned by the first cohorts or the networking and visibility opportunities towards securing a role but in the way it redefined partnership in education. It brought together industry expertise, academic rigour of both in-depth knowledge and practical skills, and a focus on employability to create a dynamic learning ecosystem. Through the co-creation between the university, industry leaders like Salesforce and mentoring professionals, CTLD demonstrated how innovative partnerships can bridge the gap between education and the industries for which it prepares students.

One of the programme's key takeaways was the role of emotional intelligence in co-creation. Building authentic connections with students, alumni, and industry partners turned CTLD into more than an initiative; it became a shared journey. For instance, celebrating high achievers on LinkedIn amplified their visibility, inspiring other students to persevere. Sharing professional achievements on LinkedIn had a significant impact on our PG students within the CTLD programme, especially those earning Salesforce certifications. By posting their milestones, students not only celebrated their efforts but also significantly boosted their professional visibility. For many, this step marked the foundation of a digital presence that attracted engagement from industry professionals, opening doors to networking opportunities, mentorship and eventually jobs.

Achievements, shared via LinkedIn, not only inspired students within the programme by cultivating a culture of mutual encouragement but also caught the attention of students outside the programme who expressed a strong interest in joining after witnessing the real-world value of their achievements. Additionally, an industry taster day at the Salesforce Tower in London not only deepened students' technical knowledge but also strengthened their sense of belonging in a global professional ecosystem.

Conclusion

The CTLD programme exemplifies the transformative potential of co-creation in higher education. It is an interactive platform where students, university and industry stakeholders engage in a continuous process of knowledge co-creation. This process combines the artifacts (AI-driven learning tools, Salesforce software), Processes (peer mentoring, industry engagement), Interfaces (digital learning platforms, video diaries), and Persons (students, university and industry mentors). These elements converge to enhance student learning through multi-layered interactions rather than the traditional one-way transfer of knowledge from university to students.

In an era of AI-driven education, CTLD is a co-created programme that bridges the gap between education and employment, preparing students for the data-driven, 21st-century career. Reflecting on this journey, we highlight the importance of adaptability, shared accountability and emotional intelligence in building sustainable partnerships. As CTLD continues to evolve, its success demonstrates a simple truth: co-creation is not just about delivering programmes; it is about shaping futures. Through mutual investment in the process, all stakeholders become co-authors of a narrative that goes beyond traditional boundaries, charting the education course that is both inclusive and impactful.