Looking for a gap year with a difference? One with meaning? With the chance to try something new and exciting? If you are interested in really learning some things about yourself, then U-START might just be for you.

Picture yourself and a small group of travelers in the idyllic Southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia, Canada, building a strong personal foundation to help you shape your future through real-life experience, friendship, challenge, play, and inquiry all in one.

Through a personalized curriculum based in ethical decision-making, indigenous world-view, human development, evolutionary biology, nature-based learning and philosophical exploration, you will be given a unique opportunity to discover your own beliefs, values and strengths and to define your own “true north” to guide you confidently through whatever path you decide to shape for yourself through life.
Where is the program located?

For the first part of the year you will be based in the Southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia Canada. Much of your time will be spent on Salt Spring Island where you will find a perfect balance of natural, pastoral, and minimally-urban settings. From time to time you will also travel via water taxi to other, more remote islands — Saturna, Galiano, Mayne, and Pender — from time to time, via water taxi, to enjoy all that the Gulf Islands have to offer. The Gulf Islands were long ago recognized by British ex-pats as the ideal climate, with their mild winters and warm, dry summers. The area is home to a widely varied population in socio-economic terms, boasting many artists and artisans who draw their inspiration from the surrounding natural beauty. Because the Gulf Islands are perfectly nestled between Vancouver Island and the city of Vancouver, you will have the chance to enjoy the full range of mountain, ocean, rainforest, and city adventures. You’ll do it all!

Whether you’re trekking along the spectacular Pacific coast of Vancouver Island, Kayaking between the islands, or sampling the bright lights of Vancouver city, British Columbia really does have it all.

The second part of U-START is optional but highly recommended. After experiencing the beauty and tranquility of the Gulf Islands, you will be able to take these experiences with you to a developing part of the world to apply your newly-honed competencies and to test your now well-established philosophies as you work and learn among people for whom even the most basic needs cannot be taken for granted.

How long is the programme? (in Canadian English ‘program’)

The Gulf Islands portion of U-START is approximately 3 months in length: from mid-September to early December. Over this time, you will have an opportunity to acclimatize to your new setting and to immerse yourself in the experience. You may find yourself wanting to stick around a little longer in December, but we’ll leave that decision up to you.

The optional second part of U-START could be anywhere from 2 to 4 months, starting in mid-January and ending no later than mid-April. This depends entirely on where you choose to travel and what arrangements fit your host community and your own personal schedule.
What will I do there?

While in the Gulf Islands, you will be engaged in a real-world “curriculum” that will see you learning through action, conversation, and connection. Mini-lectures and seminars with prominent local and not-so-local thinkers, creators, and experts will comprise part of the U-START experience. Topics will include....

How we learn
- The neurobiology of learning and human development
- Evolutionary biology related to children, adolescents and young adults
- Cognitive and emotional self-regulation and its relationship to success
- Indigenous ways of knowing

Ethical Literacy and Moral Courage
- How to make a “right versus right” decision
- How ethics can temper knowledge and ability
- How ethical filters can help organizations make better decisions

Environmental/Ecological Awareness and Practice
- Understanding ecosystems
- “Nature Deficit Disorder” and the importance of our connection to nature
- Natural ecosystem immersion (Gulf Islands forest, field, intertidal, and ocean zones)
- Working ecologically versus working in isolation

Philosophical Foundations - Inquiry Project
- An inquiry-based project of your own design, intended to add context and cohesion to your experiences and discussions during your U-START. You will be lightly guided by a facilitator to develop an idea and to assemble a support network of mentors and/or co-learners.

Settings within which you may choose to pursue your project could include
- working/observing in a “Strong Start” parent-involved early earning centre
- exploring or studying in nature
- art, writing or music-based mentorship setting
- community-based observational study
- organic agricultural micro-business or farm
- local aboriginal/indigenous community
- anything else the Gulf Islands can offer (in other words, anything else!)
Who will be with me?

Your group will be supported by a community-based “mentor” who will act as your point of contact to ensure that you settle in fully to your new environment. You will also be supported in your learning and projects by a series of tutors and lecturers, but guided mainly by one central learning path facilitator who will help you make the most of your experiences. The guiding will, of course, be tailored to each individual participant. You are in the driver’s seat!

Guiding may include facilitated dialogue and conversation, journaling, powerful questioning, connections with local mentors and study subjects, and linking your experiences here with the rest of your life.

Remember, you are doing this to find your edge and hone it!

How will this enrich my life?

U-START is based on a core set of values that will largely shape your experience:

- Creativity
- Originality
- Open-mindedness
- Self-discovery
- Competence
- Hope
- Joie de Vivre
- Human Connection

The program is designed to give you enough structure but enough freedom to come face-to-face with each of these values in different contexts. The world needs people who can live through these values. U-START is your chance to practice this and to create a value-based foundation for yourself upon which you can build the rest of your life.

What will this cost?

The cost will vary from person to person, but housing, food, local transportation, and the facilitated program will cost about CAD$4000. A return air ticket from the UK to Vancouver can be had for around £600. More detailed cost information will be available very soon, and certainly before you sign on any dotted lines!

Interested…?

Send all enquiries by email to either:
- John Abbott, Director, 21st Century Learning Initiative … mail@21learn.org
- Jeff Hopkins, Superintendent, Gulf Islands School District … jhopkins@sd64.bc.ca
- Lorenzo McLellan, Assistant in England to John Abbott … oznerol@hotmail.co.uk