

# Sydney's Aborigine 'cultural sanctuary'

By Phil Mercer  
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**Described as a watershed moment in recent Aboriginal history, Australia's first Centre for Indigenous Excellence has opened in the inner-city district of Redfern in Sydney.**

Its mission is to lift the burdens of high levels of unemployment, imprisonment and ill-health, as well as spiralling rates of drug and alcohol addiction, that have crushed successive generations by reigniting cultural pride as well as providing first-class education and sporting facilities.

"We are very much about giving young people a different kind of experience to open their eyes and to help them dream," said Jason Glanville, the centre's chief executive.



The young people learn skills to help them get jobs

A running theme throughout the buildings is the bold application of reddish paint used to symbolise the ceremonial importance of rust-coloured ochre in Aboriginal rituals.

The A\$50m (\$46m; £30m) project boasts two gyms and a heated swimming pool along with a computer laboratory, child-care centre and dance studio.

**" The course is heaps good - I reckon many of the boys will stop doing crime if they get a job "**

Cameron Lyons

Early autumn drizzle has made the cavernous sports hall a refuge for impromptu games of soccer and basketball, while a full-sized football pitch waits for Sydney's weather to turn on its usual charm.

The centre aims to provide a cultural sanctuary for young Aborigines aged between 12 and 30, while complementing the work of schools and colleges.

Up to 5,000 people from tropical Darwin to chilly Hobart are expected to take advantage of its services and courses each year.

"What is missing generally from classrooms in the mainstream education system is access to their culture," Mr Glanville told the BBC.

"Too often indigenous young people are in the minority in those classrooms. What they find when they come here is that they are the majority, the centre is all about them and their futures.

"They get to be in a very black environment [and] they get to engage as Aboriginal people with each other."

### **Crime life**

Outside, the swimming pool buzzes with activity as a boisterous group of students navigates a sea survival course that will provide the necessary qualifications for those looking for work as deckhands on Sydney harbour and beyond.

Today's lesson is how to cope when a boat sinks and all on board are forced into the water before a life raft is deployed.

**" These kids here, who have many dramas in their lives, just want to make something happen "**

Shane Phillips

"There is a lot to learn but it is pretty easy," explained 16-year old Cameron Lyons.

"The course is heaps good. I reckon many of the boys will stop doing crime if they get a job.

"I've lived my whole life around crime. I've witnessed bashings, bags snatched and break-and-enters," said the teenager, who added that the opportunity to learn a trade had sent him on a new direction in life.

"I am proud to be Aboriginal. You feel welcomed to be here. It's pretty good," he said.

The sea-safety course is run by the Redfern-based Tribal Warrior Association, an indigenous maritime training company that is led by Shane Phillips.



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Cameron Lyons

He is a tireless Aboriginal campaigner, who as a child went to school on the site where the new centre of excellence now stands.

"I had very bad memories from this school and to see something positive come out of it is such a great turnaround," he said.

"It is warming to see that these kids here, who have many dramas in their lives, just want to make something happen in the face of adversity. They have drive."

"They are all disadvantaged kids, but they just need some discipline, a sense of belonging and worth," he added.

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