EFFECTIVE SUPERVISOR-STUDENT COMMUNICATION

Ideally, supervisors take a number of steps to ensure that they communicate effectively with dissertation students. These may include:

- allowing sufficient time to discuss the project and related matters with each student,
- limiting distractions and interruptions during meetings (e.g., having phone calls diverted),
- being explicit about expectations, roles and responsibilities,
- ensuring the student understands and supports the agreed approach to the research topic,
- listening attentively and, if necessary, paraphrasing to ensure understanding,
- providing feedback on ideas and work in positive and constructive terms, and
- keeping records of plans, decisions and work to date.

To help to ensure that communication is effective in supervisory meetings, supervisors can also consider what they and their students are communicating by:

- body language (e.g. do you face your student and maintain an ‘open’ posture, lean forward slightly to signal alertness and maintain eye contact)
- tone of voice (As this can communicate as much as what you say, try to maintain a friendly, responsive and engaged tone).
- level of formality (Notice whether your student responds using the same level of formality, when you speaking formally or informally. Remember some international students may not be familiar with colloquial expressions and may also be uncomfortable about using a supervisor’s given name).

Finally, try to interpret questions or comments from your student in the best possible light. If necessary, ask specific questions to establish the student’s level of performance or knowledge.
If there are communication difficulties...
Here are some steps you might consider taking, if you and your student have some difficulty understanding what each other says (e.g. if either of you speaks English with an accent that the other isn’t used to):

• using the relevant feature of MS Word to annotate soft copies of your student’ work to avoid any difficulty regarding interpretation of your handwritten comments,
• agreeing that both of you will try to speak a little more slowly and avoid or explain any unfamiliar different words,
• encouraging your student to record the conversation, so that it can be replayed later,
• asking your student to email some key questions to you before each meeting, and encouraging your student to seek support and advice from relevant support services in your university and other dissertation students in your School, who might have experienced similar difficulties.

Original Source: Improving HDR Supervisor Practice  (G1.3 Effective supervisor-student communication (adapted from GRIP Module 3)
Modified for use with coursework dissertation students: Lynne Roberts, Curtin University, Lynne.Roberts@curtin.edu.au
Modified Version Source: http://www.dissertationsupervision.org/