As remarked by former European Commissioner for Regional Policy, Johannes Hahn, Cohesion policy is probably ‘the most evaluated EU policy’. Since it is implemented via rules that require the European Commission and member state authorities to monitor its implementation systematically across all stages of the policy cycle, there exist abundant data upon which assessments can be based.

It is also one of the most studied policies of the European Union (EU). The scientific articles, research papers, graduate and undergraduate student dissertations and academic volumes published on this policy since the early 1990s (that is, after the landmark reform of 1988) are too many to be counted. What is possibly even more striking is that this academic interest has not waned with time, but is continuing with great momentum to the present day. In only the last three years (2013–2015) there have been at least four monographs dedicated exclusively to EU Cohesion policy, not to mention the innumerable scientific publications on this topic in edited volumes and peer-reviewed journals, and the scientific papers presented at academic conferences and policy events.

Because of its developmental and redistributive potential, Cohesion policy is also one of the best-known policies of the EU and one which elicits the spontaneous interest of individuals beyond the policy or academic community. For the same reason, it is also closely scrutinised, its effectiveness is frequently assessed and its resources have been diverted to many different uses. It is therefore not just scholars across the widest range of disciplines – first and foremost political science – that have an interest in this policy, but also public authorities, interest groups, non-governmental organisations and citizens at large.

Against this backdrop, then, why another book on EU Cohesion policy? What could it possibly contribute in the midst of such abundance of sources and perspectives?

At the beginning of this journey, there were a number of objectives that we intended to achieve. A first, overarching aim was to provide in a single source of reference all the information necessary to understand what Cohesion policy is about, how it operates and the impacts that it has on the stated objectives it is meant to serve, making this Handbook a useful tool for scholars, students and practitioners alike.

We were, second, keen to offer different perspectives, an ambition which is reflected in the choice of authors as well as topics. The ‘outsider’ views by those who study Cohesion policy – the academics who have signed the majority of chapters – have been complemented by the insights of policy ‘insiders’ who provide their take on the policy from their first-hand experience of it (notably the chapters on the European Parliament, Committee of the Regions, EIB and ECA, which were drafted by members and officials from those institutions). The cross-sectoral character of the policy is also reflected in the variety of disciplinary approaches that can be found across the volume (primarily from political science, but also from economics, geography and spatial planning), some of them providing new cutting-edge research.

Finally, we intended to capitalise on a varied typology of sources: not just academic
references, but also policy documents, evaluations and primary data which provide a rich (but often unused in academic texts) source of evidence to better appreciate the policy and its achievements.

When we were approached by Edward Elgar to edit a Handbook on Cohesion policy in the EU, we accepted the invitation with enthusiasm. Whilst not being naïve enough to nurture the ambition of providing a systematic review of all the available knowledge on the topic, we were as convinced as the publishers that it was time for a comprehensive stocktaking exercise. The policy has been evolving constantly since its inception and we wished to provide both a long-term, summative view of the more established perspectives and research topics, and a critical review of the most recent themes and developments to package a product that would become a comprehensive source of reference for the variety of actors who – in different guises and with different levels of prior knowledge – share an interest in it. In this light, we did not want the volume to speak only the language of political science, or indeed of academia, but rather to reflect the variety of idioms that have developed around Cohesion policy, crossing in this way both disciplinary and professional boundaries.

We leave it to the reader to judge whether our ambitions were justified and, indeed, met. On our part, after almost two years of work, the publication of this volume feels like the end of a journey whose itinerary had been carefully planned at the outset but which, as often happens with travels, at the same time took us in new directions, to cover more and different ground than we had initially anticipated. This journey was an enriching experience for us and for this reason we would like to thank a number of people who shared it with us and made it possible.

First, we would like to thank Edward Elgar for inviting us to engage in this adventure, and the editorial team led by Alex O’Connell and Rebecca Stowell for their constant support, flexibility and responsiveness. Second, we would like to thank our travel companions: the many contributors to this volume who have chosen to make time in their already very busy schedules to provide their insights for this collection. We are very grateful for the dedication that they showed in delivering contributions of the highest quality and intellectual value, and for their patience in accommodating two very demanding editors. The elaboration of financial appropriations data in the chapters of Part III would not have been possible without the clarifications on DG Regio data provided by John Walsh (via Veronica Gaffey), and the methodological advice received from Ugo Fratesi and Rocco Bubbico, to all of whom goes our recognition. We obviously remain responsible for eventual factual and editorial mistakes that should still appear even after several rounds of careful fact-checking. We would also like to thank Hugo Poelman (DG Regio) for providing us with the maps of Cohesion policy eligibility for all programming periods since 1989 and Wolfgang Petzhold for directing us to him, as well as the European Union for permission to use illustrative material in this book reproduced under its copyright.

NOTES

2. Although not claiming to represent the view of the institution they belong to, but only their own.