

RECONFIGURING BORDERS THROUGH HIGH-SKILLED MIGRATION: KOREA AND EUROPE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article examines how high-skilled migration policies reconfigure legal borders by comparing South Korea's Top-Tier Visa and the European Union's EU Blue Card. In response to population ageing, low fertility, labour shortages, and global competition for talent, both Korea and the EU have strengthened legal pathways for attracting high-skilled migrants. However, their institutional designs differ significantly. Korea's Top-Tier Visa is structured around state-led selection, national strategic industries, and conditional pathways to settlement, whereas the EU Blue Card relies on standardized legal criteria, employment contracts, salary thresholds, professional qualifications, rights-based residence, and intra-EU mobility. Using legal and policy analysis combined with a comparative legal approach, this study examines four dimensions: selection criteria, residence stability, labour market access and mobility, and pathways to long-term settlement. The analysis shows that Korea selectively admits top-tier talent in advanced sectors such as semiconductors, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and batteries, but its system remains strongly conditioned by administrative verification and industrial policy objectives. By contrast, the EU Blue Card provides a more rights-based and multi-level framework by linking residence and work authorization with family reunification, equal treatment, social rights, and mobility across member states. The article argues that high-skilled migration policy should not be understood as debordering or simple liberalization. Rather, it represents selective legal openness through which states and supranational legal orders differentially allocate mobility, residence rights, labour market access, and settlement opportunities. Contemporary borders are therefore not disappearing but being reconfigured as normative and institutional boundaries that privilege particular categories of talent.

Keywords

High-skilled migration, Selective legal openness, Top-Tier Visa, EU Blue Card, Reconfiguration of borders.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a forma como as políticas de migração de pessoas altamente qualificadas reconfiguram as fronteiras legais, comparando o «Visto de Nível Superior» da Coreia do Sul com o «Cartão Azul da UE» da União Europeia. Em resposta ao envelhecimento da população, à baixa fertilidade, à escassez de mão-de-obra e à concorrência global por talentos, tanto a Coreia do Sul como a UE reforçaram as vias legais para atrair migrantes altamente qualificados. No entanto, os seus modelos institucionais diferem significativamente. O «Visto de Nível Superior» da Coreia está estruturado em torno de uma seleção liderada pelo Estado,



de indústrias estratégicas nacionais e de vias condicionais para a fixação, enquanto o «Cartão Azul da UE» assenta em critérios jurídicos padronizados, contratos de trabalho, limiares salariais, qualificações profissionais, residência baseada em direitos e mobilidade intra-UE. Recorrendo a uma análise jurídica e política combinada com uma abordagem jurídica comparativa, este estudo examina quatro dimensões: critérios de seleção, estabilidade da residência, acesso ao mercado de trabalho e mobilidade, e vias para a fixação a longo prazo. A análise revela que a Coreia admite seletivamente talentos de alto nível em setores avançados, tais como semicondutores, biotecnologia, inteligência artificial e baterias, mas o seu sistema continua fortemente condicionado pela verificação administrativa e pelos objetivos da política industrial. Em contrapartida, o Cartão Azul da UE proporciona um quadro mais baseado em direitos e em vários níveis, ao associar a autorização de residência e de trabalho ao reagrupamento familiar, à igualdade de tratamento, aos direitos sociais e à mobilidade entre os Estados-Membros. O artigo defende que a política de migração de pessoas altamente qualificadas não deve ser entendida como a eliminação das fronteiras ou uma simples liberalização. Pelo contrário, representa uma abertura jurídica seletiva através da qual os Estados e as ordens jurídicas supranacionais atribuem de forma diferenciada a mobilidade, os direitos de residência, o acesso ao mercado de trabalho e as oportunidades de estabelecimento. As fronteiras contemporâneas não estão, portanto, a desaparecer, mas sim a ser reconfiguradas como limites normativos e institucionais que privilegiam categorias específicas de talentos.

Palavras-chave

Migração de pessoas altamente qualificadas, Abertura jurídica seletiva, Visto de Nível Superior, Cartão Azul da UE, Reconfiguração das fronteiras.

How to cite this article

Lee, Joonpyo (2026). Reconfiguring Borders Through High-Skilled Migration: Korea and Europe in Comparative Perspective. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier – Geopolitics of Anxiety: Ideology, Identity, and (Un)Bordering in Contemporary Europe and Asia, VOL. 17 Nº. 1, TD3, September 2026, pp. 41-62. DOI <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0626.3>

Article submitted on March 30, 2026 and accepted on May 10, 2026.





RECONFIGURING BORDERS THROUGH HIGH-SKILLED MIGRATION: KOREA AND EUROPE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE¹

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Introduction

As labour shortages caused by low fertility, population ageing, and the upgrading of industrial structures have emerged as structural challenges, many countries have come to regard the attraction of high-skilled talent as a central task for maintaining national competitiveness. As the transition toward a knowledge-based economy accelerates, high-skilled migrants are no longer viewed merely as a supplementary labour force but as strategic resources that shape innovation capacity and technological competitiveness. In response, states have increasingly refined their visa systems, residence statuses, and settlement-support policies to compete in the global “talent competition” (INSEAD & Portulans Institute, 2025, p. 10).

As Shachar (2006) argues, contemporary states compete to attract the “best and brightest” by using legal statuses such as residence rights, settlement rights, and citizenship as incentives. In this sense, high-skilled migration policy should not be understood simply as a mechanism for admitting foreign workers or managing population mobility. Rather, it constitutes a legal and institutional device through which states selectively identify, attract, and incorporate categories of foreign nationals. Whereas traditional foreign labour policies focused primarily on the functional management of labour shortages in industrial sectors, contemporary high-skilled migration policies are increasingly linked to advanced industrial competitiveness, innovation capacity, and national growth strategies.

This shift is evident in both Korea and the European Union (EU). Korea has introduced the Top-Tier Visa as a policy response to population ageing, low fertility, and labour shortages in advanced industries, thereby institutionalizing the entry and settlement of high-skilled foreign talent. The EU, for its part, has revised the EU Blue Card system in order to strengthen a regional framework for the mobility of high-skilled third-country nationals. Although both systems represent strategic migration policies designed to respond to global talent competition, they differ significantly in their legal criteria for

¹ This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2024S1A5C2A02046352).



selecting high-skilled migrants, the ways in which they provide residence stability and labour market mobility, and the institutional pathways through which long-term settlement is enabled. These differences reveal distinct modes of the “selective reconfiguration of borders” in the field of high-skilled migration.

Despite the growing importance of this issue, existing scholarship has tended to focus mainly on labour market demand, economic effects, and demographic policy. Relatively little comparative legal analysis has examined how high-skilled migration policies allocate differentiated rights of mobility and residence to selected migrants through specific legal criteria and institutional structures. This gap is particularly notable in the Korean case. Although Korea’s high-skilled migration policy has recently undergone rapid institutionalization, its legal structure and settlement orientation have not yet been sufficiently examined in comparison with the EU Blue Card.

Against this background, this study compares the legal frameworks governing high-skilled migration in Korea and the EU, focusing on Korea’s Top-Tier Visa and the EU Blue Card. More specifically, it examines how the selection criteria, residence stability, labour market access and mobility, and pathways to long-term settlement for high-skilled migrants are institutionalized in each system. The study addresses the following research questions. First, what legal criteria do Korea and the EU use to select high-skilled migrants? Second, how do the two systems guarantee residence stability and labour market mobility? Third, how are institutional pathways to long-term settlement structured? Fourth, how do these legal frameworks institutionalize high-skilled migration, and how are they related to the selective reconfiguration of borders?

Methodologically, this study combines legal and policy analysis with a comparative legal approach, drawing on relevant statutes, policy documents, and government materials from Korea and the EU. By doing so, it analyses high-skilled migration policy not merely as an instrument for attracting talent, but as an institutional mechanism through which states and supranational legal orders differentially allocate mobility, residence rights, labour market access, and settlement opportunities. The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the legal characteristics of high-skilled migration policy and the analytical framework of the study. Section 3 examines Korea’s Top-Tier Visa system. Section 4 analyses the legal structure of the EU Blue Card. Section 5 compares the two systems and draws out the institutional, theoretical, and policy implications of high-skilled migration policy.

Analytical Framework

The Legal Nature of High-Skilled Migration Policy

High-skilled migration policy should be understood not merely as a mechanism for managing population mobility or admitting foreign workers, but as a legal and institutional device through which states selectively admit particular categories of foreign nationals. Traditionally, migration policy developed around the regulation of labour supply and demand and the control of national borders. More recently, however, it has been reoriented toward attracting specific forms of talent on the basis of economic value,



technical capacity, and innovation potential. This shift is closely related to the view that international migration is structured not only by market forces but also by state policy choices and institutional frameworks (de Haas, 2011, p. 2).

The modern state has increasingly been reconfigured as a “migration state” that seeks to balance economic openness with political control (Hollifield, 2004, p. 885). High-skilled migration policy illustrates this tension particularly clearly. States need external talent to sustain economic growth and industrial competitiveness, yet they must also manage and control migration. Accordingly, high-skilled migration policy does not constitute a form of unrestricted openness. Rather, it creates a selective management structure in which openness and control are combined.

In this process, states classify certain foreign nationals as “high-skilled talent” by applying criteria such as educational qualifications, professional experience, income level, employment contracts, and technological fields, and grant them more stable residence statuses and rights. This structure goes beyond administrative classification. It functions as a legal framework that differentially allocates mobility, residence stability, labour market access, and settlement opportunities. Such a selective structure is also related to Shachar’s (2006) notion of a “talent-for-citizenship exchange,” in which states strategically offer legal statuses such as residence rights, permanent residence, and citizenship in order to secure the knowledge, skills, and economic contributions of high-skilled talent.

Therefore, high-skilled migration policy should not be understood through a binary distinction between opening and restricting migration. Rather, it should be analysed as a selective legal framework through which states differentially distribute mobility and rights in accordance with their policy objectives and economic needs.

Key Dimensions of Comparative Analysis

From this perspective, this study identifies four analytical dimensions for comparing high-skilled migration policies in Korea and the EU. This framework builds on existing scholarship that understands high-skilled migration policy not simply as a system of entry authorization, but as a legal structure through which states select particular forms of talent and differentially allocate residence status and rights (Shachar, 2006; Hollifield, 2004). It is also connected to the policy perspective of the Global Talent Competitiveness Index 2025, which emphasizes the importance of states’ capacity to attract and retain talent in the context of global talent competition (INSEAD & Portulans Institute, 2025).

The first dimension is selection criteria. This refers to the legal requirements through which states define and select high-skilled migrants. Educational qualifications, professional experience, income level, employment contracts, and links to strategic industries function as key criteria for privileging or excluding particular migrants.

The second dimension is residence stability. This concerns the extent to which high-skilled migrants can reside securely in the receiving state or region. The length of residence, conditions for maintaining residence status, possibilities for renewal, and pathways to long-term residence are central indicators for assessing whether a high-



skilled migration policy is oriented merely toward short-term labour recruitment or toward longer-term settlement.

The third dimension is labour market access and mobility. This refers to whether high-skilled migrants are tied to a specific employment relationship or are able to move relatively freely within the labour market. Occupational restrictions, the possibility of changing employers, inter-sectoral mobility, and regional mobility directly affect both the utilization of migrants' skills and the stability of their residence.

The fourth dimension is pathways to settlement. This refers to the institutional possibilities through which high-skilled migrants may be incorporated into the receiving society over the long term. These include access to permanent residence, long-term resident status, family accompaniment, labour market access for family members, and links to social rights.

These four dimensions are analytically distinct but closely interconnected. Selection criteria determine the conditions of entry; residence stability defines the continuity of legal status after admission; labour market mobility shapes the scope and autonomy of economic activity; and pathways to settlement affect the long-term social incorporation of high-skilled migrants. This study uses these four dimensions to compare how the high-skilled migration regimes of Korea and the EU institutionalize selective openness and the reconfiguration of borders.

Selective Openness and the Reconfiguration of Legal Borders

The analytical framework outlined above allows high-skilled migration policy to be understood through the lens of "selective openness." High-skilled migration policy does not operate by fully opening or closing borders. Rather, it differentially grants mobility, residence, labour market access, and settlement opportunities to migrants who meet specific criteria. In this sense, high-skilled migration policy can be seen as a process of legal selection through which states determine which migrants are to be admitted and which are to be excluded (Shachar, 2006, p. 148).

Within this structure, borders are no longer limited to territorial boundaries. They are reconfigured as normative boundaries that differentially distribute mobility and rights through legal requirements and institutional criteria (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 3). High-skilled migration policy should therefore be understood not as a process of debordering, but as a process through which states readjust the operation of borders in accordance with economic needs and legal criteria.

High-Skilled Migration Policy in Korea

Policy Background

Korea's foreign labour policy has long developed around a functional system for admitting foreign workers to compensate for labour shortages in industrial sectors. In manufacturing, construction, agriculture, livestock, and fisheries, the policy focus has



been on admitting and managing low- or medium-skilled foreign workers for limited periods in order to meet sectoral labour demand. In this process, migration policy was designed primarily from the perspective of labour market supplementation and residence control. Such a structure tended to treat foreign workers as temporary labour resources for addressing shortages in specific industries, rather than as long-term members of society.

However, recent demographic and industrial changes have exposed the limitations of this conventional approach. The deepening of low fertility and population ageing, the decline of the working-age population, and the restructuring of the economy around advanced industries have all increased the need to reconsider Korea's migration policy. In particular, as the securing of high-level technical personnel in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and batteries has become directly linked to national competitiveness, Korea's immigration policy has increasingly been expected to move beyond simple labour supplementation and toward the attraction and settlement of high-skilled talent. This indicates that immigration policy is no longer a peripheral component of labour policy, but has become a strategic policy domain closely connected to industrial policy, demographic policy, and innovation policy.

This policy direction is more clearly reflected in the government's 2030 Future Strategy for Immigration Policy. The strategy identifies the attraction of outstanding foreign talent and support for their settlement in Korea as key policy tasks, moving away from the previous emphasis on low-skilled and low-wage foreign labour. In particular, it seeks to establish an institutional basis for attracting high-level talent in advanced industries and enabling such migrants to reside and settle stably in Korean society. In this respect, the strategy can be understood as a policy document that reflects a medium- to long-term transformation in Korea's immigration policy (Ministry of Justice, 2026, p. 1).

Nevertheless, the actual structure of Korea's foreign labour force remains heavily centred on non-professional and functional workers. As of December 2025, the number of professional foreign workers staying in Korea under the E-1 to E-7 categories was 107,634, whereas the number of non-professional workers under the E-8, E-9, E-10, and H-2 categories reached 486,413, more than four times higher (Korea Immigration Service, 2026). This shows that, despite the government's policy emphasis on attracting high-skilled talent, Korea's foreign labour structure still relies heavily on a functional labour admission system designed to supplement labour shortages in industrial sectors. Accordingly, Korea's high-skilled migration policy may be understood as transitional in character: it remains rooted in the existing foreign labour management system, while gradually introducing limited settlement-oriented elements.

Legal Basis and Selection Criteria of the Top-Tier Visa

The most notable instrument in Korea's policy for attracting high-skilled foreign talent is the Top-Tier Visa. In terms of its legal basis, the Top-Tier Visa is institutionalized as a subcategory of the Residence (F-2) status under Item 24 of Table 1-2 of the Enforcement Decree of the Immigration Act. More specifically, Ministry of Justice Notice No. 2025-86,



titled Notice on the Qualification Criteria and Eligible Persons for Top-Tier Talent in Advanced Fields among Persons Falling under Item 24(j) of Table 1-2 of the Enforcement Decree of the Immigration Act, sets out the qualification criteria and categories of eligible persons for top-tier talent in advanced fields. Therefore, the Top-Tier Visa should not be regarded merely as a policy slogan or administrative programme. Rather, it constitutes a legal and administrative residence pathway specified through the Residence (F-2) status under the Enforcement Decree and further detailed by the Ministry of Justice Notice.

The Notice defines “advanced fields” as areas in which innovative technologies or research are carried out in industry, venture business, start-ups, and research sectors for the purpose of strengthening national competitiveness. These fields are to be determined by the Minister of Justice in consultation with the heads of relevant central administrative agencies. The Notice also defines “top-tier talent” as high-level personnel at the level of chief engineer or mid-career researcher or above who plan projects and lead research or technological development in advanced fields (Ministry of Justice Notice No. 2025-86, Article 2). This definition shows that the Top-Tier Visa is not a general scheme for all professional workers, but a selective programme targeting top-level talent capable of leading technological development and research in advanced fields.

The core of the Top-Tier Visa lies in its strict qualification requirements. Under Article 3 of Ministry of Justice Notice No. 2025-86, applicants must have obtained a master’s or doctoral degree from a world-class university and must possess a certain period of relevant experience in advanced fields at a global top 500 company, a government-led research institute, or a comparable institution. They must also have an annual income of at least three times the per capita Gross National Income (GNI) of the previous or preceding year. In addition, applicants must satisfy requirements related to the Social Integration Programme or the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), and must undergo verification and recommendation by relevant central administrative agencies (Ministry of Justice Notice No. 2025-86, Article 3).

These requirements constitute a complex selection structure combining educational qualifications, professional experience, income level, Korean language or social integration capacity, and administrative verification. In particular, by using criteria such as graduation from a world-class university, experience at a global top 500 company, and high income, the Top-Tier Visa distinguishes high-skilled talent from the broader category of foreign workers. In this respect, it functions as a legal and administrative device for selecting individuals who are likely to contribute to national strategic industries.

The Notice also provides certain exceptional pathways. Article 4 of Ministry of Justice Notice No. 2025-86 allows not only those who satisfy all the criteria under Article 3, but also certain other persons to be included among eligible applicants. These include individuals who do not fully meet some of the educational or experience requirements but have an income of at least four times the per capita GNI of the previous or preceding year; individuals who have worked for at least one year in an advanced field at a domestic company and meet the relevant income requirements; and individuals whom the Minister



of Justice recognizes as possessing outstanding knowledge and technology necessary for strengthening competitiveness in advanced fields (Ministry of Justice Notice No. 2025-86, Article 4). This indicates that the Top-Tier Visa is based on strict formal requirements while also incorporating a degree of discretionary recognition to reflect the specific characteristics of advanced industries and the flexible evaluation of talent.

Overall, the selection structure of the Top-Tier Visa is organized around relevance to national strategic industries, world-class educational and professional credentials, high income, and government verification, rather than around a broad notion of professional expertise. The system therefore shows how Korea adjusts the openness of its borders by selectively admitting top-level talent deemed necessary for national industrial policy, rather than by broadly incorporating high-skilled migrants as a general category of professional workers.

Residence Stability, Labour Market Access, and Settlement Pathways

The Top-Tier Visa includes settlement-oriented elements that distinguish it from conventional short-term employment-based residence statuses. Talent selected through this scheme may be incorporated into a subcategory of the Residence (F-2) status, which enables them to obtain relatively stable residence and broader opportunities for economic activity compared with existing employment visas. This indicates that Korea's policy for attracting high-skilled talent is moving beyond simple employment authorization and toward a framework that takes long-term residence and settlement into consideration.

In terms of residence stability, the Top-Tier Visa provides a more stable structure than existing employment-based statuses such as the E-7 visa. The E-7 status is generally premised on a specific occupation and employment relationship, and the maintenance of residence status is closely tied to continued employment. By contrast, the Top-Tier Visa is based on the Residence (F-2) status, thereby providing high-skilled talent with a more stable residence status. This structure is significant because it creates an institutional basis for high-skilled migrants to reside and work in Korea over the long term, rather than being used merely as short-term labour resources.

The Top-Tier Visa also offers broader possibilities for labour market access than conventional employment visas. Existing professional residence statuses are often linked to specific employment contracts, occupations, and workplaces, which may restrict the labour market mobility of foreign professionals. By contrast, the F-2-based Top-Tier Visa allows relatively broad economic activity, thereby expanding the scope of career choice and occupational mobility for high-skilled migrants. This can be regarded as an institutional advantage that enables high-skilled migrants to utilize their skills and expertise more flexibly.

With regard to settlement pathways, the Top-Tier Visa includes elements designed to support long-term settlement, such as family accompaniment, housing and education support, and the possibility of obtaining permanent residence after a certain period of stay (Ministry of Justice, 2025, p. 1). This represents an important shift in that high-skilled migration is no longer understood only as individual employment mobility, but



also as involving family-based living conditions and the possibility of long-term social incorporation. In the competition to attract high-skilled talent, residence stability, family accompaniment, children's education, and the prospect of long-term settlement can all function as important factors influencing migrants' decisions.

Nevertheless, this settlement orientation remains limited. Although the Top-Tier Visa provides high-skilled migrants with more stable residence and the possibility of settlement, its scope is restricted by strict legal and administrative requirements, including advanced-field eligibility, world-class educational and professional credentials, high income, and verification and recommendation by relevant government ministries. Therefore, while the scheme represents an important step toward introducing settlement-oriented elements into Korea's immigration policy, its openness is strongly conditioned by national strategic needs and administrative selection criteria.

Relationship with Existing Visa Categories

The Top-Tier Visa was introduced not as a replacement for the existing residence status system for professional workers, but as a supplementary pathway within that system. In Korea's regime for high-skilled or professional foreign workers, the most representative residence statuses are the E-7 visa for designated activities and the D-10 visa for job seeking. These statuses have allowed foreign professionals to enter the labour market and engage in employment in Korea, but they have also revealed certain limitations in terms of residence stability, labour market mobility, and long-term settlement.

The E-7 visa is the representative employment-based residence status that allows foreign nationals to work in specific professional fields. In particular, the E-7 visa has an industrial policy character in that occupations are designated by Ministry of Justice notices in response to sectoral demand in areas such as information technology, biotechnology, and semiconductors, and these occupational categories may be expanded or adjusted as needed (Lee, 2025, p. 80). The visa has served as a major channel for attracting high-skilled workers by allowing qualified foreign nationals to engage in professional activities at companies or institutions in Korea. However, the E-7 visa is generally premised on a specific occupation and employment relationship, and the maintenance of residence status is closely connected to employment status. As a result, the labour market mobility of foreign professionals may be relatively limited, and their dependence on a particular employer or job may be high.

Another important limitation is that the E-7 category includes both high-skilled professionals and skilled functional workers. In practice, the E-7 status is divided into professional workers (E-7-1), semi-professional workers (E-7-2), general skilled workers (E-7-3), and skilled functional workers (E-7-4). As of March 2025, skilled functional workers under the E-7-4 category accounted for 49.7 per cent of all E-7 visa holders (Lee, 2025, pp. 81–82). In particular, the E-7-4 scheme is designed to allow foreign nationals already residing in Korea under the E-9, E-10, or H-2 categories to convert to the E-7-4 status if they satisfy certain skill and employment-duration requirements. This is meaningful in terms of securing skilled workers for industrial sites, but it differs in



character from the attraction of globally competitive high-skilled talent in advanced industries. Therefore, when the attraction of high-skilled talent and the conversion of skilled functional workers coexist within the same broad professional worker category, the clarity of policy objectives may be weakened (Ministry of Justice, 2023; Jin, 2024).

The D-10 visa is a job-seeking residence status that allows foreign students or professionals to search for employment opportunities in Korea. This status functions as a supplementary mechanism for expanding the inflow and settlement potential of high-skilled talent by allowing individuals to stay in Korea for a certain period before securing employment. However, because the D-10 visa is a residence status for the job-seeking stage, it cannot itself be regarded as a system that guarantees stable long-term residence or settlement.

Foreign students are also important as a potential source of high-skilled talent. After completing their studies at Korean universities under the D-2 residence status, foreign students may convert to a D-10 job-seeking visa or an E-7 professional employment visa. In practice, however, the transition process may be constrained by requirements such as the alignment between academic major and job duties, income thresholds, and employment contracts. This suggests that Korea's international student policy has not yet been organically linked to its high-skilled immigration policy (Park, 2023; Korean Educational Development Institute, 2023).

Compared with these existing categories, the Top-Tier Visa has a different legal character. Whereas the E-7 and D-10 visas each focus on a specific stage—employment or job seeking—the Top-Tier Visa, as a subcategory of the Residence (F-2) status, considers long-term residence and settlement from the stage of selection. In other words, the Top-Tier Visa is not merely an employment authorization status. Rather, it is a scheme designed to expand the possibility of long-term settlement by granting a more stable residence status to top-tier talent in advanced fields.

At the same time, the Top-Tier Visa should be understood not as a comprehensive restructuring of the entire residence status system for professional workers, but as an additional preferential pathway for top-level talent built on the existing system. Korea's current regime operates through multiple categories, including E-7, D-8-4, and F-2, but automatic and sequential linkages to long-term settlement have not yet been sufficiently institutionalized (Lee, 2025, pp. 85–86). In particular, because the legal basis of the Top-Tier Visa is found in the F-2 residence status under the Enforcement Decree and is further specified by a Ministry of Justice notice, it is more appropriately understood as a special residence pathway combining subordinate legislation and policy-based selection criteria, rather than as a comprehensive high-skilled immigration system established at the statutory level.

Legal Assessment: Selective Openness under State-Led Control

Korea's policy for attracting high-skilled talent represents an important institutional development in that it provides a selectively open residence pathway for high-skilled foreign nationals. In particular, the Top-Tier Visa has legal significance because it



establishes a separate set of criteria for top-tier talent in advanced fields within the Residence (F-2) status under Table 1-2 of the Enforcement Decree of the Immigration Act, and specifies the qualification criteria and eligible persons through Ministry of Justice Notice No. 2025-86.

Nevertheless, Korea's high-skilled migration regime remains grounded in state-led selectivity and conditional control. First, its selection structure is strongly oriented toward industrial policy. The advanced fields covered by the Top-Tier Visa are determined by the Minister of Justice in consultation with the heads of relevant central administrative agencies. This shows that the scope of high-skilled talent is defined less by a broad concept of professional expertise than by national industrial policy needs and administrative judgment.

Second, residence stability has improved, but it remains conditional. The Top-Tier Visa expands the possibility of long-term residence and settlement through the F-2 residence status. However, access to this status is limited to those who satisfy strict criteria concerning education, professional experience, income, Korean language ability or social integration, and verification and recommendation by relevant central administrative agencies. Thus, the Korean system does not guarantee settlement as a general right for high-skilled migrants; rather, it constructs settlement as a special status granted to individuals who meet specific conditions.

Third, labour market mobility has been partially expanded, but remains limited at the level of the broader system. The Top-Tier Visa provides broader opportunities for economic activity than the existing E-7 status because it is based on the F-2 residence status. However, Korea's professional residence status system as a whole remains closely linked to specific employment relationships, occupations, and industrial sectors. Accordingly, the expansion of labour market mobility is only partially realized within the limited pathway of the Top-Tier Visa.

Fourth, pathways to settlement have been introduced, but they remain selective and limited. The Top-Tier Visa includes institutional elements for long-term settlement by presenting the possibility of obtaining permanent residence after a certain period of stay. However, this pathway is primarily available to a limited group of top-tier talent in advanced fields. It is therefore difficult to conclude that Korea has developed a generalized settlement-oriented system across its broader high-skilled immigration policy.

In sum, Korea's high-skilled migration policy is moving away from the previous model of low-skilled and temporary foreign labour management toward a system that takes the attraction and settlement of high-level talent into account. However, its legal structure is not yet a general settlement-oriented immigration regime. It is better understood as a special pathway selectively open to top-level talent needed for national strategic industries. Korea's high-skilled migration regime therefore expands selective openness, but remains grounded in state-led selection and conditional control.



High-Skilled Migration Policy in the European Union

Policy Background

The European Union (EU) has recently faced the dual challenge of demographic change and labour market imbalance. Labour shortages have continued to emerge across a wide range of sectors, including tourism, healthcare, and information and communication technology (ICT), directly affecting economic growth and industrial competitiveness. In this context, legal migration has increasingly been regarded as an important policy instrument for addressing labour market needs in the EU, while the attraction of high-skilled talent has become a key strategy for maintaining technological competitiveness and innovation capacity (European Commission, 2022, p. 1).

Demographic change is a particularly important background factor behind the strengthening of the EU's high-skilled migration policy. The EU faces the long-term structural problem of a declining working-age population. The share of the working-age population, which stood at approximately 65 per cent in 2019, is projected to fall to around 55 per cent by 2070 (European Commission, 2022, p. 1). Since this problem stems not from cyclical labour shortages but from long-term demographic transformation, the EU has sought more proactive policy responses, including the attraction of talent from outside the Union. The OECD has likewise emphasized that population ageing and shortages of skilled labour have increased the importance of migration policy, and that high-skilled migration is being used as a major policy instrument for addressing labour market demand (OECD, 2025, p. 6).

The EU Blue Card system is the EU's representative legal framework for high-skilled migration, established to facilitate the entry and residence of high-skilled third-country nationals. It is not merely an entry permit. Rather, it functions as a residence and work permit that allows qualified third-country nationals both to reside and to work in an EU member state (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 2(3); Art. 9(7)). In particular, Directive (EU) 2021/1883, revised in 2021, sought to make the EU a more attractive destination for high-skilled talent by introducing more flexible admission criteria, faster procedures, expanded rights, and strengthened mobility between member states.

In legal terms, the EU Blue Card is based on an EU Directive. A Directive is binding on member states as to the result to be achieved, while leaving to national authorities the choice of form and methods of implementation (TFEU, Art. 288(3)). Accordingly, although the EU Blue Card establishes common legal standards at the EU level, its actual application depends on implementation through the domestic laws of each member state. In this respect, the EU Blue Card should be understood not as a fully unified single immigration regime, but as a multi-level legal framework combining EU-level common standards with national implementation structures. Directive (EU) 2021/1883 also recognizes that member states may maintain separate national residence permits for high-skilled migrants in addition to the EU Blue Card (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 3(3)). The EU Blue Card thus has a dual character: it is an EU-level common legal framework, while at the same time operating through member-state implementation and coexistence with national schemes.



Legal Basis and Selection Criteria under Directive (EU) 2021/1883

The selection structure of the EU Blue Card is organized around an employment contract, a salary threshold, and higher education qualifications or equivalent professional experience. This shows that the EU does not select high-skilled talent on the basis of abstract capacity alone, but institutionalizes high-skilled migration in connection with actual labour market demand.

The first core requirement is an employment contract or a binding job offer. Applicants must present a contract or binding offer of highly qualified employment for at least six months, on the basis of which residence status is granted (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 5(1)(a)). The EU Blue Card is therefore not a general job-seeking visa or points-based immigration scheme, but an employment-oriented high-skilled migration system based on an actual or prospective employment relationship. This structure reflects the EU's policy orientation toward managing the admission of high-skilled talent in connection with labour market demand.

The second requirement is a salary threshold. The EU Blue Card requires applicants to meet a minimum salary level set by the member state, which must correspond to a specified multiple of the average annual salary (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 5(3)–(5)). This salary requirement functions as an institutional mechanism for verifying whether the employment concerned requires a high level of expertise and skill. In this sense, the EU Blue Card uses salary level as an indirect indicator of skill level and potential economic contribution within the labour market.

The third requirement is higher education qualifications or equivalent professional experience. The Directive allows not only higher education qualifications but also a certain period of professional experience to be recognized as "higher professional skills" (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 2(7)–(9); Art. 5(1)(b)–(c)). In particular, in the ICT sector, professional experience may be recognized as equivalent to educational qualifications, thereby increasing flexibility in response to labour market demand and technological change. This indicates that the EU Blue Card is not limited to an education-based model, but is designed to reflect both actual labour market demand and professional competence.

This selection structure differs significantly from Korea's Top-Tier Visa. Whereas the Korean system focuses on national strategic industries and the selection of top-level talent, the EU Blue Card links high-skilled employment and labour market demand through employment contracts, salary levels, and professional qualifications. The selection criteria of the EU Blue Card are therefore based less on the administrative designation of specific industries than on relatively objective legal requirements for high-skilled employment.

Residence Stability, Labour Market Access, and Settlement Support

A key feature of the EU Blue Card is that it provides high-skilled talent with a certain degree of legal rights and residence stability beyond mere employment authorization.



The Directive generally provides for a minimum period of residence of at least 24 months and grants EU Blue Card holders the right to reside and work legally in the member state concerned (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 9(2), Art. 9(7)). This is linked to the EU's broader policy objective of expanding legal migration pathways and providing high-skilled migrants with a more predictable residence environment.

Labour market mobility is also a central element of the EU Blue Card. The Directive allows changes of employer and labour market movement under certain conditions, and provides for a more relaxed regime of labour mobility after a certain period (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 15(1)–(4)). This mechanism is intended to enable the expertise and skills of high-skilled migrants to be used more flexibly. However, labour market access under the EU Blue Card is not entirely unrestricted. It remains subject to the institutional scope of highly qualified employment and to the specific implementation practices of individual member states.

Family accompaniment is another important feature. The Directive provides for more flexible family reunification and supports the swift entry and residence of family members of high-skilled migrants (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 17). The accompaniment and rights of family members are important conditions for enabling high-skilled migrants to remain and settle over the long term. This suggests that the EU approaches the attraction of high-skilled talent not merely as a matter of short-term labour recruitment, but also from the perspective of long-term social integration.

Social rights and equal treatment are also important components of the EU Blue Card system. EU Blue Card holders may enjoy equal treatment with nationals of the member state concerned in various areas, including working conditions, education and training, and social security (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 16(1)). This shows that the EU Blue Card is not simply an employment permit, but a rights-based residence status. Its rights structure indicates that the EU Blue Card recognizes high-skilled migrants as rights-bearing persons, rather than merely as selectively admitted workers.

However, these rights are not granted universally to all migrants. They are limited to high-skilled migrants who satisfy the requirements set out in the Directive. Therefore, although the EU Blue Card strengthens a rights-based approach, the rights it provides continue to operate within the framework of selective openness.

Intra-EU Mobility and Pathways to Long-Term Settlement

One of the most important features of the EU Blue Card is that it institutionalizes mobility between member states. The Directive allows EU Blue Card holders to move to another member state and engage in highly qualified employment under certain conditions (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Arts. 20–21). This mechanism enables high-skilled migrants not to remain fixed within a single member state, but to move and be utilized within the EU labour market as a whole.

This intra-EU mobility constitutes an important point of contrast with Korea's employment-based residence structure. Korea's residence status system for professional workers is generally closely tied to specific employment relationships, occupations, and



industrial sectors. By contrast, the EU Blue Card institutionalizes mobility within the EU under certain conditions. This indicates that the EU understands high-skilled migrants not merely as labour tied to the market of a single state, but as a resource that can enhance the competitiveness and flexibility of the EU labour market as a whole.

Pathways to long-term settlement are also a key feature of the EU Blue Card. The Directive institutionalizes the possibility of converting accumulated periods of legal residence into long-term resident status and allows periods of residence in different member states to be taken into account (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Recital 51; Art. 18). This is important because it shows that high-skilled migrants are not regarded merely as short-term workers, but as a population group that may be incorporated into EU society over the long term.

Family accompaniment and social rights are also closely connected to pathways to long-term settlement. The possibility of long-term residence for high-skilled migrants is not determined solely by individual employment conditions. It is also closely related to the residence stability of family members, children's education, access to social security, and the labour market participation of family members. The EU Blue Card may therefore be understood as a system that institutionalizes the mobility of high-skilled migrants while also providing, to a certain extent, a social basis for long-term settlement.

Nevertheless, this possibility of long-term settlement is not an unconditional right. Long-term residence and settlement pathways under the EU Blue Card remain linked to employment status, salary requirements, residence periods, and member-state implementation conditions. Actual operation may vary depending on domestic law and administrative procedures in each member state. Therefore, although the EU Blue Card strengthens a settlement-oriented approach, its implementation remains multi-layered and conditional.

Legal Assessment: Rights-Based Selective Openness in a Multi-Level Legal Order

The EU Blue Card is the EU's representative legal framework for high-skilled migration. It provides third-country nationals who meet requirements concerning employment contracts, salary thresholds, and educational qualifications or professional experience with residence stability, labour market access, family accompaniment, social rights, and mobility between member states. In this respect, the EU Blue Card goes beyond a simple entry permit or employment authorization and may be understood as a rights-based high-skilled migration regime that grants a relatively comprehensive legal status to selected high-skilled migrants.

First, the EU Blue Card strengthens a rights-based approach. The Directive provides for labour market access, equal treatment, social security, and family reunification, thereby granting high-skilled migrants a relatively stable legal status (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Arts. 15–17). This shows that the EU recognizes high-skilled migrants not merely as temporary labour resources, but as migrants with the potential for long-term residence and social integration.



Second, the EU Blue Card institutionalizes the possibility of long-term residence and settlement. By granting a legal status that combines residence and employment to migrants selected through employment contracts, salary thresholds, and educational or professional qualifications, and by providing a pathway to long-term resident status under certain conditions, the EU designs high-skilled migration not as a short-term employment permit, but as part of a long-term talent attraction strategy.

Third, the EU Blue Card operates within a multi-level legal order. Since it is based on a Directive, the EU Blue Card establishes common standards at the EU level, but its actual operation depends on implementation through the domestic laws of member states (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 3(3); Art. 4). Differences may therefore arise in application procedures, salary thresholds, recognition of qualifications, and administrative processing. These variations can limit the uniformity and predictability of the system (de Lange & Vankova, 2022, p. 4).

Fourth, the EU Blue Card coexists with national high-skilled migration schemes. Directive (EU) 2021/1883 recognizes that member states may maintain separate national residence permits in addition to the EU Blue Card. This preserves the policy autonomy of member states, but at the same time limits the extent to which the EU Blue Card can function as a single and coherent high-skilled migration system across the Union.

Fifth, the openness of the EU Blue Card remains limited to high-skilled migrants who satisfy specific requirements. Employment contracts, salary thresholds, and professional qualifications function not only as criteria for selecting high-skilled migrants, but also as criteria for excluding those who do not meet the required standards (Directive (EU) 2021/1883, Art. 5). Thus, although the EU Blue Card strengthens rights-based status and mobility, it is not a universally accessible migration regime. It remains a structure of selective openness limited to a particular category of migrants.

In sum, unlike Korea's state-led and industrial policy-oriented model, the EU Blue Card more strongly institutionalizes rights-based status and intra-EU mobility. At the same time, it faces limitations arising from differences in member-state implementation, coexistence with national schemes, and its restricted openness to selected high-skilled migrants. The EU Blue Card should therefore be understood not as a fully unified EU-level immigration status, but as a conditional and multi-layered high-skilled migration pathway operating through national implementation structures. It also functions as a selective legal boundary open only to migrants who satisfy specific requirements.

Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

Comparative Findings

Both Korea and the EU have strengthened their high-skilled migration policies in response to global talent competition and structural labour shortages. However, the two systems differ significantly in their criteria for selecting high-skilled migrants, the ways in which they grant residence status and rights, the extent to which they allow labour market mobility, and the manner in which they institutionalize pathways to long-term settlement.



Whereas Korea's Top-Tier Visa is based on administrative selection centred on national strategic industries and conditional pathways to settlement, the EU Blue Card emphasizes standardized legal requirements based on employment contracts, salary thresholds, and professional qualifications, as well as rights-based mobility. These differences show that selective openness in high-skilled migration is institutionalized in different ways within each legal order.

First, with regard to selection criteria, Korea adopts a policy-driven and administrative selection structure centred on advanced industries and national strategic sectors. The Top-Tier Visa targets top-level talent in sectors such as semiconductors, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and batteries. It requires globally competitive educational and professional backgrounds, high income levels, and verification and recommendation by relevant government ministries. By contrast, the EU Blue Card defines high-skilled migrants primarily through employment contracts, salary thresholds, higher education qualifications, or equivalent professional experience. This approach differs from Korea's administrative designation of specific strategic industries, as it is based on relatively standardized legal criteria linked to labour market demand.

Second, differences are also evident in residence stability and pathways to settlement. Korea's Top-Tier Visa provides a more stable residence status than conventional employment-based visas because it is based on the Residence (F-2) status. However, its scope is limited to a narrow group of top-tier talent in advanced fields. The Korean system therefore introduces settlement-oriented elements, but its character remains limited and exceptional. By contrast, the EU Blue Card provides a legal status that combines residence and employment authorization, and it institutionalizes the possibility of transition to long-term resident status under certain conditions. In addition, by linking family accompaniment and social rights to residence status, the EU Blue Card offers a clearer settlement-oriented framework for high-skilled migrants.

Third, labour market mobility is one of the areas in which the differences between the two systems are most evident. In Korea, the Top-Tier Visa allows broader economic activity than employment-based visas such as the E-7. Nevertheless, Korea's overall residence system for professional foreign workers remains closely tied to specific employment relationships, occupations, and industrial sectors. As a result, labour market mobility for high-skilled migrants has improved, but it remains constrained at the level of the broader institutional system. In contrast, the EU Blue Card permits job changes and labour market mobility under certain conditions, while also institutionalizing intra-EU mobility. This indicates that the EU regards high-skilled migrants not merely as labour tied to a particular member state, but as mobile human resources that can enhance the flexibility and competitiveness of the EU labour market as a whole.

Fourth, the two systems also differ in their pathways to long-term settlement. Korea's Top-Tier Visa introduces settlement-supportive elements, including family accompaniment, housing and education support, and the possibility of acquiring permanent residence. However, these pathways are primarily available to a limited group of top-tier talent in advanced fields. Moreover, the step-by-step linkage between existing visa categories such as E-7, D-10, D-2, F-2, and permanent residence has not yet been



sufficiently institutionalized. By contrast, the EU Blue Card provides a relatively clearer route to long-term incorporation by linking family reunification, equal treatment, and the possibility of transition to long-term resident status. Nevertheless, even in the EU, actual settlement pathways remain multi-layered and conditional because of differences in national implementation and the coexistence of domestic high-skilled migration schemes.

Table 1. Comparative Findings on High-Skilled Migration Policies in Korea and the EU

Dimension	Korea: Top-Tier Visa	EU: EU Blue Card
Selection criteria	Strategic industries, education, professional experience, income level, and government recommendation	Employment contract, salary threshold, higher education qualification or professional experience
Residence stability	F-2-based residence status, but conditional and exceptional	Directive-based residence and work permit with clearer legal safeguards
Labour market mobility	Broader than E-7, but still constrained by employment and sectoral structures	Job mobility and intra-EU mobility allowed under certain conditions
Settlement pathways	Selective and limited access to permanent residence	Linked to long-term residence, family reunification, and equal-treatment rights
Legal character	State-led, industry-oriented selective openness	Rights-based selective openness in a multi-level legal order

Ultimately, Korea and the EU share the common feature of selectively admitting high-skilled talent, but they differ in the manner in which selection and openness are organized. Korea has developed an administratively driven selection model centred on national strategic industries and conditional pathways to settlement, whereas the EU has developed a multi-level high-skilled migration regime centred on labour market integration, rights protection, and intra-EU mobility.

Selective Legal Openness and the Reconfiguration of Borders

The high-skilled migration policies of Korea and the EU do not operate by fully opening or closing borders. Rather, both systems selectively provide opportunities for mobility and settlement to individuals who satisfy specific criteria. In this respect, both can be characterized as forms of “selective legal openness.”

However, such selective openness does not simply mean an expansion of openness. Contemporary borders are being reconfigured beyond physical territorial boundaries into normative boundaries that operate through legal and institutional criteria such as education, income, professional experience, employment contracts, and industrial sectors. In other words, borders no longer function merely as mechanisms for determining admission. They also operate as institutional structures that differentially allocate mobility, residence stability, labour market access, and possibilities for long-term settlement.



In Korea, this selective legal openness operates mainly through national strategic industries and administrative verification. High-skilled talent is understood as a strategic resource that can contribute to the competitiveness of advanced industries, and expanded residence and settlement opportunities are granted only to those who meet the criteria defined by the state. In the EU, by contrast, selective legal openness is institutionalized through a rights-based approach and intra-EU mobility. By combining family rights, social rights, equal treatment, and mobility between member states, the EU Blue Card institutionalizes high-skilled migrants as a mobile population group connected to the EU labour market and society as a whole.

Nevertheless, both systems remain selective in that they are open only to migrants who satisfy specific requirements. High-skilled migrants are granted expanded mobility, residence stability, labour market access, and possibilities for long-term settlement, while migrants who do not meet these criteria remain in more restricted and precarious legal positions. High-skilled migration policy therefore does not weaken borders. Rather, it reconfigures borders into more sophisticated and differentiated legal mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study has analysed how high-skilled migration policies are institutionalized through specific legal structures and policy logics in the context of global talent competition by comparing Korea's Top-Tier Visa and the EU Blue Card. The analysis shows that Korea has developed a selective management model centred on national strategic industries, whereas the EU has developed a multi-level governance model that emphasizes rights-based status and intra-EU mobility.

This comparison demonstrates that high-skilled migration policy is not merely an instrument for securing labour. Rather, it is a legal mechanism that differentially distributes mobility, residence rights, labour market access, and pathways to settlement. By analysing high-skilled migration policy through the lens of "selective legal openness," this study has shown that borders are not being weakened or dismantled. Instead, they are being reconfigured as normative boundaries selectively opened to particular categories of talent.

From a policy perspective, Korea's task is not simply to expand the attraction of foreign talent, but to strengthen institutional linkages that allow high-skilled migrants to reside and settle over the long term under a predictable legal status. To this end, Korea needs to clarify the sequential linkages between the Top-Tier Visa and existing visa categories such as E-7, D-10, D-2, F-2, and permanent residence, while more systematically combining labour market mobility, family accompaniment, and settlement support.

In conclusion, high-skilled migration policy should be understood not as a result of debordering, but as a process of readjusting the operation of borders through selective openness. Korea's future high-skilled migration policy needs to move beyond a short-term attraction strategy centred on national strategic industries and develop into a stable settlement-oriented legal framework capable of incorporating high-skilled migrants as long-term members of society.



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