

# Building the future of innovation

## Selecting cities for life sciences real estate in Europe

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In the rapidly advancing realm of biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, life sciences real estate is more than bricks and mortar – it's the enabler of innovation. Investors venturing into this sector are essentially betting on ecosystems that need real estate to grow. Think of it as the skeleton that keeps the muscles in place and the body as a whole standing. There are certain strategic parameters that can be used to select the right European cities for life sciences real estate investments. This must then be woven in with external push and pull factors that are forcing companies in the life sciences sector to adjust when it comes to their real estate footprint.

### **The nexus of development: educated workforce, financing and companies**

At the heart of life sciences innovation lies a robust, interdisciplinary talent pool with access to financing supported by company leadership. Cities with a high concentration of graduates in biotechnology, medicine, data science, and engineering give life sciences companies the human capital needed to thrive.

Universities' role in life sciences goes far beyond teaching; they serve as catalysts for collaboration, driving industry-academia partnerships, and facilitating technology transfer. Cities renowned for their academic institutions, such as Paris or Cambridge, are uniquely positioned to foster a dynamic and sustainable innovation ecosystem.

Higher education institutions also provide vital research infrastructure. They offer laboratories, collaborative research

centers, and incubators that attract venture capital, public funding, and international academia-industry partnerships. For instance, universities known for their research in molecular biology and personalized medicine often work closely with established pharmaceutical companies, accelerating everything from early-stage R&D to clinical trial execution. The University of Oxford works with Novo Nordisk, Freie Universität Berlin works with Bayer and Pfizer. Many other academia-industry partnerships exist, they are the standard rather than not.

Companies seek this out as well. As companies respond to demand forces for their products, they look for the educated staff that has the knowledge needed to develop said products. Working with and providing leadership to research institutions and universities is a crucial funnel which directs the brainpower of an educated workforce into the right direction. Companies also have the balance sheets and the network needed to access vast amount of financing across the capital stack, ranging from venture capital funding to private equity to debt.

Combine these three factors – an educated workforce from top-level universities, access to financing and companies providing leadership – and you create the cluster effects that support the life sciences ecosystem that a real estate investor wants to build the skeleton for.

### **The cluster effect and real estate**

In the realm of life sciences, 'location, location, location' goes beyond traditional

real estate value – it extends to the creation and enlargement of clusters that rise around the aforementioned nexus. The cluster effect occurs when companies, research institutions, and support services are co-located, creating a self-reinforcing ecosystem that amplifies innovation and efficiency. Cities like Oxford, Cambridge, London, Paris or Berlin exemplify this phenomenon, where the presence of long-established pharmaceutical giants has spurred the development of research parks, specialized industrial units, and top-tier laboratories.

Investing in cities that already have established life sciences real estate assets provides several strategic advantages. These locations offer a proven track record of collaborative success, reduced developmental delays, and a supportive and established supply chain ecosystem. Existing facilities mean that companies facing the imminent expiration of key patents can quickly repurpose or scale operations without the prolonged lead times required to construct new, compliant spaces. As a result, investors can leverage historical performance data and an established network – all of which reduce risk and enhance the likelihood of resilient leasing demand for labs and related real estate space.

Furthermore, the presence of mature clusters attracts additional investment. Ancillary businesses – from logistics and specialized consultancy firms to regulatory compliance experts – gravitate toward these hubs. This self-reinforcing network effect means that a city's attractiveness as

a life-sciences innovation center continues to grow over time, making it a veritable magnet for both public and private capital.

### Putting it to practice

We can use these insights to screen and prioritize cities to invest in when it comes to life sciences real estate. Various different indicators should be considered but the key ones are:

- the university landscape, especially with regards to life sciences research and quality of universities;
- life sciences real estate activity, including leasing and investment deals;
- access to and flow of financing;
- access to an educated workforce and the local economic outlook

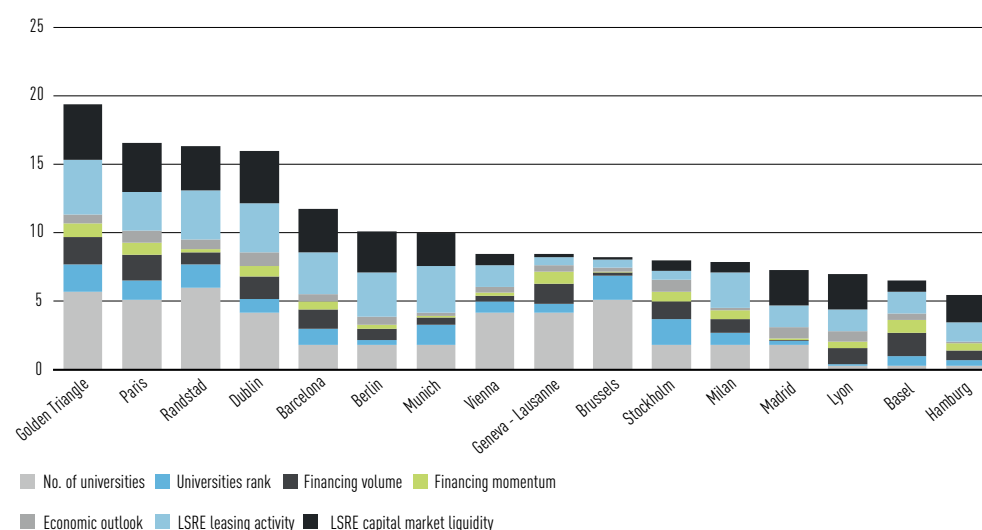
Relying on those factors yields the following ranking of key cities that should be strongly considered as destinations for life sciences real estate investment (figure 1). The Golden Triangle in the UK, consisting of Cambridge, Oxford, London and neighboring and related cities, sits at the top, followed by Paris and the Randstad region. A second cluster of rising hubs, consisting of e.g. Berlin and Barcelona, follows the established key centers. Those rising hubs are driven by increased activity from companies in the industry reflected in leasing and capital market activities with life sciences real estate (LSRE) assets. But this activity, within Europe, may be about to shift.

### Reciprocal tariffs can redefine firms' location choices

Recent shifts in global trade dynamics – most notably, the imposition of tariffs – will likely reshape the strategies of multinational life sciences companies. (LSRE) These tariffs, which increase the costs of exporting to another market, have a profound impact on market access strategies.

If US companies face higher tariffs when exporting finished products to Europe, many are likely to opt for horizontal foreign direct investment (FDI) instead of traditional trade approaches. Horizontal

Figure 1 – Ranking of key European cities when it comes to attractiveness of life sciences real estate investment



Source: UBS Asset Management, Global Real Assets, April 2025

FDI involves establishing production and R&D facilities within the target market – in this case, Europe. This strategy circumvents the tariff impediments while simultaneously taking advantage of local tax incentives and established innovation networks. This would allow the investing company to access, tariff-free, an economic block that is on par with that of the US: EU's GDP in purchasing power parity terms was USD 26.4 trillion in 2023, compared to USD 27.7 trillion for the US.

Likewise, however, pharmaceutical companies may choose to move production capabilities from Europe to the US if tariffs on imports are high. According to Eurostat, the key market in Europe that is exposed to this risk is Ireland. In 2024, the EU exported EUR 120 billion worth of medicinal and pharmaceutical products over to the US. More than a third, EUR 44 billion, came from Ireland alone while Germany, which ranked second, exported less than two thirds (EUR 28 billion) of Ireland's volume. Indeed, the growth of Ireland's exports of those goods over to the US has been around 25% p.a. over the last decade, compared to ca. 14% p.a. for the EU as a whole. This is one of the key reasons why Dublin ranks so highly on figure 1 but this is also a risk that investors must be

aware of: ranking can change as markets shift.

If tariffs become a serious issue for the US-EU pharmaceutical trade, cities with adaptable, state-of-the-art life sciences real estate assets stand to gain from this erection of trade barriers – see figure 1. For these urban centers, the expectation would be that a number of US companies would choose to set up wholly owned subsidiaries or joint ventures, further reinforcing local clusters and accelerating innovation Ireland, however, is likely to bear the brunt of the damage in the case of Europe's access to the US market.

### A long-term, dynamic investment vision

Investing in life sciences real estate in Europe requires forward-thinking and a willingness to probe beyond short-term dynamics. By focusing on areas with deep educational systems, strong industry-university linkages, established real estate assets, and dynamic policy support, investors position themselves at the nexus of science and commerce. This is where groundbreaking products are born, and where the next generation of therapeutics will emerge – fueling not only economic growth but also significant advancements in global health.

<sup>1</sup>University of Oxford, Medical Sciences Division (2025). "Key Partnerships". Accessed 4 April 2025: <https://www.medsci.ox.ac.uk/about-us/partnerships-industry/key-partnerships>

<sup>2</sup>Freie Universität Berlin (2025). "Wirtschaftskooperationen". Accessed 4 April 2025: <https://www.fu-berlin.de/universitaet/kooperationen/wirtschaft/index.html>